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OR, HAPPY HARRY'S HURRAH PARD.

A Tale of the Hidden Lode Camp.

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TOP," "LARIAT LIL," "SANDY ANDY,"
"DESPARD THE DUELIST," "THE CHAM-
PION THREE," "BLACK-HOSS BEN,"
THE "PATENT-LEATHER JOE"
SERIES; THE "TIGER DICK"
SERIES, ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.
HAPPY HARRY.

Who Hicks was, and why his hurrah should
have given its name to a Montana mining-camp,
will appear as our story progresses.

THE FIRE-FLY SWEPT THE CLOAK FROM ABOUT HER, AND STOOD REVEALED, TO
THE WOUNDED HARRY, A THING OF LOVELINESS.

Toward Hicks's Hurrah, then, rode a man whose manner was the very reverse of what might have been expected from his disagreeable surroundings.

To begin with, the night was pitch dark, save when a flare of lightning wrapped earth and heaven in one swath of flame. Then, one might come unawares upon a pitfall at any moment—a wash-out that was good for a leg, or a lightning-riven limb of a tree that might call for a neck. Finally, the wind blew in the rider's face—an exasperating wind, that came in gusts, buffeting him on this side and that, as if from sheer perversity, and every once in a while bearing a drenching swash of rain that made the irritated horse toss his head and snort with disgust.

But the man seemed to have a temper invulnerable to these assaults. Instead of swearing, as a choleric man might, he canted his head on one side or the other, so as to shield his face with the broad brim of his hat, chuckling like a pugilist when he ducks to avoid the counter of an adversary on whose phiz he has scored his compliments; and the moment he had a fair chance for breath, he fell to singing as gayly as any lark.

The source of his good nature was not far to seek. Of a fine athletic build of not far from fifteen-stone weight, it was plain that he knew ill-health only by name, while his frank eye was ample guarantee that he had nothing serious on his conscience.

For the rest, his blonde hair and whiskers, unshorn, were left to their natural beauty; top-boots and the careless woolen shirt marked his free-and-easy mode of life; while weapons of a high finish suggested that, even with him, it was not all an idle merry-go-round.

This portent found most desperate confirmation in the midst of one of his nonsensical songs, the words of which may be reproduced, unfortunately robbed of their rollicking air and jaunty rendering:

"When I was a little kid, in Mis-sou-ri,
Fur a smack on the smeller I was fitten fur to cry;
But my ole dad, says he:—'Root, hog, or die!—
When I was a little kid, in Mis-sou-ri."

"When I was a laddy-buck in, Mis-sou-ri,
I met a fair maid, an' began fur to sigh;
But says she:—'Young feller, I've other fish to fry!—
When I was a laddy-buck in Mis-sou-ri."

"When I was a 'bad man' in Mis-sou-ri,
I 'lowed I'd go a-gunnin' fur a snoozer on the sly;
But out comes his popper, an' says he:—'I think ye lie!—
When I was a—"

Bang!—a pistol-shot pierced the multitudinous uproar of the storm.

"Eh! Ah! That's whar I live!"

And writhing half round, with a movement of one hand toward his back, the minstrel, so rudely interrupted, toppled headlong out of the saddle.

"Salted him down fur cold pig!" shouted a gruff voice, exultantly. "Now, boys, jump in an' finish him off; an' then fur to dig out o' hyar!"

From their ambush on either side of the road leaped half a dozen men, their faces hidden by pieces of old blanket.

Weapons were in the hands of all, though only one revolver had been exploded, the restraint of the others being explained by a vicious exclamation of their leader.

"I wanted him fur my meat!"

"An' you've got him—the deuce ye havel! Look out!" shouted a subordinate.

He leveled his revolver and pulled trigger as he spoke. But he was just a moment too late; for he felt a blow, as if some one had struck him on the arm, and his weapon fell from his grasp an instant before it exploded.

With a roar of rage and pain, mingled with terror, the villain seized his wounded arm with his other hand, and went spinning round like a teetotum, bellowing:

"That fixes me fur life; an' it's my right, too!"

Wounded as he was, Happy Harry had secured his revolver even before he reached the ground; and his masked enemies sprung upon the liveliest kind of a corpse.

But it was not his weapon that had done the execution described. He had blazed away at the leader of his assailants.

Fairly blending with the report of his pistol had come another, to be followed by a warning shout, and the clatter of a horse's hoofs.

"Hi, there! you villains!"

Bang! bang! bang!

Into the very midst of the astonished ruffians leaped a new-comer—one who made up in pluck

and activity what he might lack in size, for he was scarcely larger than a well-grown boy, though he proved himself an adept at the weapon which makes all men even, in spite of differences of size and strength.

Bang! bang! bang!

The champion was standing astride of the fallen Happy Harry, having leaped from his horse so as to secure greater readiness at firing in all directions.

It was a thing to see—one against six, or rather against five, his first bullet having already placed one on the hospital list.

After his shot at the leader, Happy Harry had sunk back gasping, his weakening hand unable to sustain the weight of his revolver.

He would have fallen an easy victim to the villains, and they would have filled him with lead in revenge for that one ineffectual shot, but for the "live man" who had chipped in to help him out.

Harry did not lose consciousness, nor did he miss one of the movements which the lightning revealed in his champion.

It was all done in a twinkling. Two men went down; two took to their heels; and he whose crazy-bone had been tickled by the champion's first bullet was left dancing about like a howling Dervish.

The sixth man—the leader, by the way—stood his ground till he saw that he had no one left at his back, then he too leaped into the bushes with a smothered oath.

CHAPTER II.

A JIM-DANDY.

"WAAL, I'll swear you're a Jim-dandy, whatever you hail to!" declared Harry, turning enthusiastically to his rescuer. "But, say!—what is your handle, anyway? An' whar did you drop down from?"

"Make it Jim, if that comes easy to your grip."

"Jim Dandy! So mote it be!"

"Cheese the Dandy."

"An' spoil the fittenest handle a feller ever had turned? Not ef the court knows herself; an' she's been a-gittin' points on that thar from away back! A Jim-dandy you be by nature; an' Jim Dandy you shall be by name, while I have anythin' to say about it."

"Well, that's neither here nor there. The question is, can you stand on your pins? We don't want to wait for them to rally, for they may take it into their heads to chip in again; and they *might* get away with us in the second round."

"Git away with nothin'!" scoffed Happy Harry. "I'll back you with my pile—"

"Later, if you please!" laughed the other. "Hang on to me. Sol! Now then, all together—*heave!*"

"Ugh! A-a-ah! Hang me ef that snoozer didn't put a stinger in thar!"

"Good enough!" declared the rescuer, not in reply to Happy Harry's ejaculations of pain, but as a commentary on the results of their joint heave. "You're on your pins again, anyhow; and now, if we can hoist you into the saddle."

"So's I'll stay thar!" supplemented Happy Harry, dubiously, adding, with a celerity which showed that he had indulged his fancy for improvising doggerel till it sprung naturally to his lips:

"A duffer unused to the saddle,
Who couldn't ride sideways nor straddle—
'I'm bettin'!' says he,
'You all will agree
I'm in a bad boat fur to paddle!'"

"Well!" exclaimed the rescuer, with a start of surprise, "I should say that, in your peculiar line, if in no other, you are a Jim-dandy yourself!"

"Don't take on about it, pard," laughed Harry. "I only have 'em mild, an' they don't leave no marks. That's a mighty good hoss o' yours, to stand as he did. I wish mine had had half as much gumption. But I'll be puttin' you afout."

"Nonsense! Bear down on me as hard as you want to. Here! let me lift that foot. Now then! Have you got your grip? Up you go! Steady! steady! What do you want better than that? Did it hurt you much?"

"Nary bit!" declared Harry, though a twinge of pain wrung the sweat from his forehead, and he had to cling to his helper till a dizzy sense of faintness passed.

"I would rather not have fixed you, stranger," said the champion, bending over one of the fallen men, who was writhing and groaning in anguish. "Can I do anything to make you

easier? Who are you; and what had your crowd—Eh! you villain!"

There was a brief struggle, in which a pistol exploded. Then followed a groan, and silence.

"Has that devil shot you?" cried Harry, on the point of leaping from the saddle.

"No," came the reply out of the darkness. "It wasn't his fault, though. They're a pestilent lot. If you were in trim to help me, we'd capture one of them, at any rate, and find out who he was and what crowd he trained in."

"Let 'em go," urged Harry, with the easy carelessness of one used to the hazard of life and death. "We'll pick 'em up another time." They set out for Hicks's Hurrah, on the way to which Harry's horse was overtaken, and furnished Jim a mount.

"How *did* it happen that you dropped in on us jest at that handy moment?" asked Happy Harry, with sudden curiosity.

"Oh, I—I heard the shot, you know; and a flash just then showed me what was up."

There was an odd sort of hesitancy in this reply.

In the darkness Harry could not see the face of the speaker, and he was not sufficiently attentive to detect the embarrassment in Jim's tones.

"But give me my counter," the latter kept on, rather hurriedly, as if to distract attention from himself. "How did you come to be in such a strait?"

"I suppose some chaps got hard up for the root."

"The root?"

"Of evil."

"Oh, certainly! But they seemed intent on having your life. They might have held you up without that, if it was money they were after."

"Waal, that jest depends. They may have allowed as I might be one o' them as don't let go o' their pile easy."

Jim paused, as if admitting the force of this, but presently went on, with a laugh which might however serve as a mask for a feeler:

"They do say, that when men fall by the ears, there is always a woman at the bottom of it."

"Not fur any love I bear the hussies!" cried Harry, stoutly.

"Oh, come, now! What's that you're giving me?"

"Straight goods, pard, an' a yard and a half wide."

"I'll warrant you have any number on the string!"

"Not I! You're out thar. Give me a pard in jack-boots. I take sand in mine, in the place of whims an' snivel. You're good enough for me."

"Oh!" replied Jim, with some confusion, but more mirth in his voice, "I should bother your life more than any sweetheart you ever heard of!"

"I'll risk it, Jim. Say the word, an' it's done."

"That's because you don't know me. Thank you all the same. But, you see, I have a will of my own, and, what's more, a *won't*. I always do as I've a mind to, and never give any account of myself. I've been alone so long, I've got 'set' in my ways, as they say."

"If you always show up at a pinch, an' give as good an account of yourself as you did a minute ago, what does any one want better than that?"

"Then too," persisted Jim, "I've come into this country on business. And the business of my life ain't to kick my heels, and smoke, and drink, and fight, as most of you fellows do, from morn to midnight. I may have some fighting to do before I get through with it, but it won't be for the mere love of the thing."

"I'll bet my soul you're never so happy as when you're in a muss!" cried Harry. "But, if it's fightin' you have to the fore, I'm jest the man to freeze to. I dote on it!"

"That's what I told you."

"Oh, but I mean when thar's anythin' square to fight fur. If you take me fur a brawler—"

"I haven't taken you for anything, yet."

This was said a trifle severely.

"Of course not. But, that's easy remedied. Let me tell you my good points."

"I can see them for myself, thank you!"

"You're very ready with that tongue of yours. But then, you've a right to be, havin' proved that you *kin* back it up. Howsomever, you haven't said *no*, yet."

Jim reflected a moment, and then spoke as with a sudden resolve:

"Will you take me just as I am, and no questions asked? Will you leave me free to do, or not to do, just what I please, and still no ques-

tions asked? Will you do what I ask you to, and keep your hands off till you're asked, and this too without question? It's only fair to say that there may be money in it, in the end; but, if I am mistaken, and we get nothing but hard knocks—

"Say no more!" interrupted Harry. "I'm in love with you already! Put 'er thar fur ninety days, an' make your conditions afterwards."

And he stretched out his hand impulsively. Jim drew in his breath, with a momentary hesitation between desire and doubt, and then put his hand in that of his comrade, in token of the new relation between them.

"It's as soft as a girl's," was Harry's comment. "But it's all the reader on the trigger fur that, I reckon."

"Do you suppose I'm such a tenderfoot as to bother with a trigger?" demanded Jim.

"Eh?" said Harry, not catching his meaning. For answer, Jim handed one of his weapons to his new pard.

The triggers had been removed from Jim Dandy's revolvers, so that he had but to pull back the hammer and let it slip. It was one motion instead of two, where one is sometimes worth a life.

"Waal," declared Harry, "I reckon I'll have to go to school to you!"

After that they rode on without further incident to Hicks's Hurrah, where Harry was surrounded by a host of sympathetic friends, who plied him with eager and indignant questions as to what had befallen him.

He made light of his wounds, but recommended his rescuer to their favor enthusiastically.

Having him now in the light, Harry turned with the rest to look him over curiously.

As has been said, the stranger was a mere stripling, as far as bulk and build went. He would have passed for scarcely more than a boy, but for the blue discoloration of the skin, which indicated a closely-shaven beard and mustache of quite thick growth.

Besides, he had the self-possession of a man who had seen enough of the world to be not doubtful of himself.

His hair was jet-black, as were his eyes. His skin was so smooth and clear that it might have made him appear almost effeminate, but for the bronze of exposure that made the lower face contrast with the white forehead.

But one glance into his clear, confident eyes—quiet, yet of unmistakable resolution—was enough to warrant Happy Harry's indorsement.

"He's little," he admitted,—

"But you bet he's a Jim-dandy, He is so mighty handy

With the bowie, an' the Colt's six to boot!

When thar is a chance fur fun,

You may always count him one;

Fur he is a leetle cyclone on the shoot,

Oh, yes!

He is a very terror on the shoot!"

"But who was the snoozers what went fur you?" asked a gruff voice.

With an involuntary start, Jim Dandy flashed his eyes upon the speaker, then suddenly stooped as if to pick up something from the floor.

CHAPTER III.

PRETTY PETE.

THAT he might rest as comfortably as possible while his wound was being examined, Happy Harry had been laid on one of the gambling tables in the establishment of a man known as Pretty Pete—a name suggested by the hideous disfigurement of his face.

It was this face that Jim Dandy saw when he looked around, attracted by a familiar cadence in the voice.

It had never been a prepossessing countenance. The hangdog scowl, the evasive eyes, had always marked a man against whom it would be well to be on one's guard.

But this natural badge of villainy had been made even more repulsive by a livid scar which ran diagonally across it.

The indelible record of a savage knife-thrust which had destroyed one eye and left a depression where the nose should have been most prominent, a score of legends had sprung up about this scar, till few could look upon it without a sense of quailing dread.

It is probable that none of the stories exaggerated the devilish character of the man, if indeed they added anything to the ferocity of the fight in which the scar had been received.

The one remaining eye, bloodshot and glaring out from under its snaggy, overhanging brow

with suspicious watchfulness, did not fail to observe Jim Dandy's involuntary start.

"Didn't ye git on to 'em nobow?" concluded Pete, his voice dropping to a rumbling guttural, with the effort to disguise it.

"Nary," replied Harry, observing none of this by-play.

"Suppose we take a leetle run back over the road, an' see ef we kin pick up any dead men?" suggested he of the scarred face.

"Ary chicks in a last-year's bird's-nest!" amended Harry.

But the boys were all eager to look the ground over, if nothing more; so it was determined that a party set out.

"Hyar's to luck! Step up, boys, an' lay in somethin' to keep the wet out," was the invitation of ill-favored Pete.

The boys needed no urging. But one held back.

"Eh! what's the row with you? Step up, youngster. We don't tease a man to drink in this hyar section."

"I beg you to excuse me. I never drink."

"Eh? What? The deuce ye say! Ye mean, ye don't drink with me?"

"With any one."

The quietness and brevity of the reply, the steady, undaunted glance, brought a flush of rage to Pretty Pete's ugly face. Across it the livid scar lay more hideous than ever.

"Blast you!" he snarled, "we'll see about that."

Turning to the bar, he deliberately poured a glass brimming full of liquor, with the evident determination to force the defier of this Western conventionality to swallow it.

"Let up, Pete," interposed Harry. "What's got crossways in your gizzard to-night? Ef he ain't 'lowin' to drink, that settles it."

"We'll see ef that's so," growled the bad man, doggedly.

Then, turning to Jim, he went on:

"You'll put that thar away, or I'll blow a hole through you an' pour it in that way!"

His hand whipped round to his back, and murder gleamed unmistakably from his one blood-shot eye.

But there was an interposition which even he respected, though the uninitiated might have taken it for a bit of idle nonsense droned in a lazy singsong.

"Thar went a big fightin'-man sloshin' around,

With an ass's jaw-bone that was loaded with

sound.

When he shouldn't ought ter,

He always took water;

But never he stood his ground—

Oh, no!

When 'looked fur,' he never was found."

But this was only the accompaniment to an interdiction that had no nonsense about it.

Harry had only to rise on his elbow, and rest his revolver across his forearm, to train it upon the proprietor of the place.

But what was the surprise of every beholder, when, with a quick side-step, the Jim-dandy put his body directly in the line of the frowning muzzle, facing the scar-faced man as calmly as ever.

"Eh!" ejaculated Harry. "What's this hyar?"

"I always fight my own battles," announced Jim, quietly.

"But be you goin' a-stand thar an' let him salivate you out o' hand? Why in Cain don't you draw? Maybe you 'low he don't mean it."

"Oh, no! I am well aware that he means it. But he's made a mistake, that's all. He'll see it, if you give him time."

The boys noticed that both hands of the Jim-dandy were held with apparent carelessness in the side-pockets of the roundabout coat he wore.

Pete read the significance of this as quickly as anybody.

"I reckon the gent is about right," he said, with a grin that was purely hideous in its malice.

"I 'lowed as he was a drinkin' man, but ef he ain't, why, of course that's all thar is to it—he don't drink! But, that needn't keep the rest o' you back'ards. Hyar it is, as free as the air ye breathe."

Pretty Pete turned away toward the bar, to be followed by the crowd, who, though not a little surprised to see the boss of the town bluffed in this way, were willing to drink his whisky without comment.

Harry threw his head back with his mouth agape, in a pantomime burst of triumphant laughter. His eyes sparkled, and it was plain that he was ready to signalize the event with a stave of his peculiar minstrelsy. But, he had the good sense not to crowd the already humiliated ruffian.

As he was to be their guide, Jim Dandy followed the men into the stable-yard, where mounts were to be provided for some half dozen or so who were not already supplied with horses.

As every one present was eager to be numbered with the party of investigation, there was a dead break for these horses, so that Happy Harry was left quite deserted.

As he passed a window on the way to his own animal, Jim Dandy glanced back into the room he had just left, and witnessed a sight which fixed his gaze with rapt intentness.

Through a door at the further end of the gambling saloon, a woman of rare, almost wild beauty entered, and hastened to Harry's side.

In her face and flashing eyes were intense agitation and furtive alertness.

As he bent forward, staring in upon this scene, Jim Dandy drew a deep, rasping breath, and pressed his hand upon his heart.

Without the slightest scruple, he fairly held his breath, to hear what the woman might say.

CHAPTER IV.

FLASH, THE FIRE-FLY.

WE had better stay a moment to describe the woman who entered the gambling saloon where Happy Harry lay wounded. Her singular beauty made her well worth it.

In almost every particular she followed the Spanish type; yet no Spanish blood coursed in her veins.

Her complexion was a clear olive, ordinarily with a rich glow in the cheeks, a fit background for the vivid scarlet of her full lips.

Just now both cheeks and lips were pale, and so—if it must be confessed—sallow, with excitement.

But this only heightened the intensity of her black eyes, from which she derived her sobriquet. They matched with her hair and the brows that met across her forehead.

She was very slight in build, her movements now swift and panther-like, but in a different mood languid, and always graceful.

The whole proclaimed an intensely passionate nature, and, as is often true in such case, a selfishness that did not stop at ruthless cruelty if the occasion arose.

How she was dressed could now be only guessed at, a hooded cloak, held jealously together at the throat and further down the front, hiding everything save a gay slipper, bound about the ankle with a scarlet lacing, which flashed from beneath the cloak with the impetuosity of her advance.

"Eh! Hyar's luck! An' how's the Fire-fly?" was Happy Harry's light salutation.

"She's a beauty! she's a belle! An' she weaves a witch's spell

With the smiling or the pouting of her red, red lip—"

"Hush! hush!" ejaculated the girl, scanning him with a glance of burning anxiety. "It is you, Harry? What has he done to you?"

The huskiness of the voice, the appealing terror of the eyes, told the same story. The woman loved this man as a panther might love her mate.

"He? Who?" asked Harry, with all his wonted carelessness, as far as could be seen on the surface.

The woman's eyes wavered; she held her breath an instant; then she parried this which might be a searching thrust, for all it was delivered with jaunty nonchalance.

"They said some one had shot you."

"Thar wa'n't no lie in that."

"And they have left you here to die like a dog!"

No despotism ever threw more imperious indignation into her reprobation than did this border beauty.

"Nonsense!" laughed Harry. "You are in a hurry to have me dying. I'm worth a good dozen of the gentlemen who fired at me, yet!"

Again the woman was shaken by a surge of blood back upon her heart.

"But this is no place to leave you. You should be in bed."

"When the doctor puts me thar, if you please!"

"Why have they not brought him?"

"Oh, he'll show up before the night is over. He'll have to come for his night-cap, if nothing else. Let Saw-bones alone fur a snifter before he goes to roost."

"Let me—let me see," said the Fire-fly, advancing with a struggle between shyness and a desire only to touch him.

She thrust out her hand. It was jeweled. But the masterpiece of nature needed no flashing gems to attract the eye to its dainty propor-

tions—the tapering fingers, and their polished, almond-shaped nails.

The arm, bare as far as it was disclosed, was like a flawless piece of ivory.

"Look out!" cried Harry. "You'll only soil your fingers, an' perhaps your dress. I don't want my blood on your hands."

As he spoke, he looked straight into her eyes. The woman shrunk back with a gasp.

"On my hands!" she whispered, hoarsely.

Then, with an effort, she recovered herself.

"Won't you let me do even so much—so little—for you?" she cried, with sudden passion.

"Let you probe my back with your fingers? What's the use?"

"But you have probed my bosom! You have pierced my heart!"

The woman suddenly lost all control over herself. What if the whole world heard her now?

But the man was more cautious.

"Cheese it, Flash!" he urged, dropping his voice, and glancing toward the door with evident uneasiness.

What did his voice reveal? Did he love this beautiful creature, who only too plainly was his for the asking?

Out in the darkness the Jim-dandy said to himself:

"A secret between them!"

And he was shaken with some emotion certainly as powerful as jealousy.

"Hush!" hush!" cried the Fire-fly, with acrid bitterness, so that her eyes were blinded with tears that did not fall. "It is always hush! I do not fear anything in the world! Say the word—"

"I thought we'd agreed not to say anythin' more about it," urged Harry, in a tone of expostulation meant to be soothing.

"He has loved her—or pretended to! He has tired of her, and is only too anxious to shake her off!"

This was Jim Dandy's comment. But, instead of indignation at this fickleness, there was an undertone of fierce exultation in his whisper.

Inside the saloon the drama of passion swept on, unmindful of what was passing without.

Flash, the Fire-fly, gazed at the man who repelled her, in baffled helplessness.

"You'll drive me to it!" she declared, with sudden rage. "In the end you'll drive me to it!"

"To what?" asked Harry, with a return of his steady, level, quite commanding gaze.

Instead of replying directly, the impassioned woman made a swift, lithe step nearer, so that she stood so close as almost to touch him—so that it seemed as if he must feel the fan of her warm breath.

With a lightning movement the Firefly swept the cloak from about her, and stood revealed to the wounded Harry, a thing of loveliness that might quicken any man's heart pulses.

How could any one withstand the appeal she now made?

"Take me!" she cried. "Where will you find any one to compare with me? You know you cannot!"

No Oriental queen could have been more sure of her fascinations. And her confidence was well founded, if we may judge from the effect wrought on Jim Dandy.

He fairly caught his breath, with a gasping sigh. With clasped hands he awaited Harry's decision, scarcely less wrapt than the woman who had staked all on this appeal.

Harry gazed at her, not with the impassioned look that she sought to call to his eyes, but with unmistakable admiration.

Was it her dress, as well as her person, that claimed his appreciation? There was a barbaric splendor about it that harmonized well with her Oriental style. It was an indescribable combination of black and red and old gold—a product of her own artistic sense.

On bare arms and round throat ornaments wrought out of the virgin ore lay in dull, Oriental magnificence.

On one polished shoulder a lock of hair lay like the coil of a serpent.

Would the man yield to this dream of loveliness?

A harsh voice, a heavy step, announced the approach of Pretty Pete.

Why did Jim Dandy, whose pulses had not quickened when his life was threatened by this veritable Cyclops, now lose his head in wild trepidation?

There was yet time for him to wait Harry's decision, and he had hung upon it as if his life depended upon the issue. But, instead, he abruptly turned his back to the window, and called out, as if to the men who were to follow him:

"Are you ready?"

Like a frightened bird, Flash, the Fire-fly, took the alarm, and in an instant vanished through the door by which she had entered the gambling-saloon.

CHAPTER V.

SUSPICION.

HAVING warned those within that they might be exposed to observation, Jim Dandy walked toward the group of men, composed of those who had secured the horses through the favor of Pretty Pete, and were now almost all in readiness for the outset, and the disappointed ones, who stood around grumbling, or glowering in sullen silence.

A little apart from the others, Pretty Pete was already in the saddle.

Walking straight up to him, and not speaking till he was so close that he could no longer escape observation anyway, Jim asked:

"Have you a sure horse? You will find some ugly spots between here and the scene of the attack."

And he stretched forth his hand, ostensibly with the impulse of a lover of horses to pat one when he came near it, but really to discover the condition of this particular beast, at this particular time.

Pete probably read this purpose, for a skillful touch of the spur and on the rein caused the animal to shy off quite as if of his own accord.

"Look out!" cried Pete. "What be you up to? Look after yer own hoss, an' let mine be."

"All right!" retorted Jim, carelessly. "If you hear something drop, I'll shed no tears."

Pretty Pete growled out something inaudible, and called to his men.

Instead of his hand, Jim Dandy used his eyes. It mattered not whether Pretty Pete kept his horse in motion, or allowed him to be at rest. Movements, or attitude, the one as clearly as the other, betrayed a beast whose powers had already been severely taxed.

"If I had dropped to him a little earlier, or things had taken a different turn," mused Jim, "I might have happened into yonder stable, and found a horse covered with mud, and in a lather of sweat."

"Waal! be you goin' to lead off, or not?" demanded Pretty Pete harshly.

Jim Dandy mounted, and put his horse in motion.

Riding by himself—for Pete's men, observing that their leader did not take his natural place beside the guide, gave him a wide berth—Jim Dandy had ample leisure for reflection.

"Who is this—this creature; and what is she to him?" was the first problem he set himself to resolve. "Why did he question her so? Does he suspect her of complicity in this matter? She could not have taken active part in it. What a dress that was."

"But, if at her instigation, who was her tool? Could this fellow have got back ahead of us? I observed him. His boots and hat were dry; but it struck me that his beard looked draggled with rain. There was certainly a spatter of mud on his cheek. But, what part has the woman in it?"

Reserving this matter for further observation, Jim resolved to put Pete to one test which was yet open to him.

He deliberately rode past the spot where Harry had so nearly ended his happy-go-lucky career, the victim of assassination.

He had not got far beyond it, when his expectation was justified by the interference from Pete for which he was on the lookout.

"How much further be you 'lowin' to lug us, youngster?" demanded the gambler. "I'm free to say as I'm gittin' about enough o' this."

"He is the man!" declared Jim to himself.

Then, pretending to discover his error, he turned back and pulled up at the right spot.

The lightning revealed signs of the conflict, but no dead bodies.

"They seem to have had life enough left in them to walk off—your dead men!" sneered Pete.

"If the gentlemen with the light heels did not think better of it, and return and carry them," amended Jim coolly. "My only regret is, that Harry was in no condition to help me fetch along a specimen dead man, to correct your unbelief. But if there is any one missing in this section to-morrow, we may get onto the rascals yet."

"We kin do better than that," suggested Pete. "We kin come hyar by daylight, an' foller up this trail."

"After the rain has washed it out," supplemented Jim, with a touch of sarcasm.

"Why, blast you!" shouted Pretty Pete in a rage, "maybe you'd like to foller it up now?"

"I should," admitted Jim coolly.

"Do it, then, and be hanged to you!"

"Was a lantern brought for that purpose?"

"Did you bring one?"

"I was the guide. The party is in your charge."

"Waal, I came to find dead men, not to foller live ones."

"Evidently."

It was plain that Jim Dandy was not to be browbeaten. His fearless counters won the admiration as well as the wonder of the boys who had all been cowed by the bully.

Pretty Pete was choking with rage. In the darkness, between the flashes of lightning, he half drew his revolver.

But he had the sense to know that a cold-blooded murder would make even his own camp too hot to hold him.

As nothing remained to be done, they rode back to the camp.

Pretty Pete's Ranch, as the gambling house was called, was now thronged with miners, who had assembled for the regular festivities of the evening.

The bar and the gambling tables were in full operation—all but the faro lay-out, over which Pete himself presided.

Happy Harry was reclining on a table which stood against the wall, where he could overlook the scene.

Jim Dandy hastened to his side.

"You here?" he ejaculated.

"Don't I resemble myself?" laughed Harry.

"What luck?"

"But why are you not in bed?" pursued Jim, ignoring the other's question.

Harry made a wry face.

"The doctor hasn't been hyar to put me thar, yet," he made answer. "Let me alone. I'm all right. It can't have been much of a rap, after all. It hasn't dreened blood enough out o' me to make me want to fill up on water. I reckon it was the scare more than anythin' else."

And he laughed lightly.

Looking at him anxiously, Jim saw that he was but slightly, if at all, feverish. At any rate, he would not hear to leaving his post of observation; so Jim concluded to make the best of the matter, and avail himself of the opportunity to satisfy his curiosity on several points.

"How about the name of this camp?" he asked. "Why was it called Hicks's Hurrah?"

CHAPTER VI.

HICKS'S HURRAH.

"WAAL," answered Happy Harry, "that's a thing as the boys 'ud liever let alone than talk much about, an' I don't know as I've got the straight of it."

"Why are they afraid to talk about it?" demanded Jim Dandy, quickly.

"Waal, ye see, the thing mought be a mite crooked, an then ag'in it moughtn't. It's a good deal in the way ye look at it?"

"How do you look at it?"

"Me? Oh, it ain't none o' my funeral. I never had nothin' to do with Hicks. I never so much as see him."

"What was Hicks's other name?"

"Um! Now I reckon I disremember. I don't know as I ever hyeard. But thar's Colter. He'll give ye—"

"Never mind Colter for the present, if you please. I reckon the name won't make any difference with the story. What is all the mystery about?"

"Waal, queer things is bound to happen in this hyar country. Everybody looks out fur Number One; an' ef a galoot steps out between two days, thar ain't apt to be much inquiry after him, unless he's got inquisitive friends—or owes somebody."

"So Hicks stepped out between two days, as you put it."

"That's as the story goes."

"And there was inquiry about him?"

"Waal, it made some talk, I understand."

"Among his friends?"

"Hicks, he didn't have many friends, I reckon."

"Ah! it was his creditors, then, or maybe his enemies, who were interested for him?"

"Oh, waal, that ain't to say as he had any enemies, nuther. He was one o' them lonesome cusses—es what stands everybody off; but thar wa'n't no partick'ler harm in him."

"Tell me what you know of him. I reckon that will be as good a way as any to get at the story."

"Waal, now, you've set me to chinnin' hyar till I do believe I'm a mite thirsty. Ef I'm to keep my yawp on the gape till I blow all I know about Hicks—though that ain't so very much either—I reckon I'd better wet my whistle before I begin. But make it water. I don't always greuse my elbow, when I've got a tune to fiddle, the way most o' the boys do."

And this conceit seeming to inspire him with the heavenly afflatus, he burst forth:

"There was an old fiddler—fiddle-de-dee!
An' a very fine fiddler's fiddle had he.
He fiddled the fiddle,
A-criss-cross the middle,
Till it shrieked in its misery—*Squeakity-squeak!*"

Jim went off with a backward glance over his shoulder at this effusion. He suspected that it was a mask for a twinge of pain.

In his absence Harry called to one who was passing the window near his head:

"H'iste that sash a mite, will you, Sam? Them lamps make it hotter'n blazes in hyar."

Returning, Jim did not notice this change. The storm, being from the other quarter, did not blow directly into the room.

Harry drank the water with thirst more marked than he had acknowledged to.

Regarding him anxiously, Jim did not however interrupt the story he was about to tell.

"Hicks, by all accounts, was an odd Dick. He come hyar when the camp was further down the gulch; an' jest because he wanted elbow-room, I reckon, he stuck in his pick up hyar whar nobody else thought o' comin'."

"Nobody knowed whar he come from. But that wa'n't nobody's business; so nobody asked. An', they do say, it wouldn't 'a' done 'em no good ef they had; fur he was as close-mouthed as an oyster."

"He never made nor meddled with none o' the boys; an' they mighty soon got over tryin' to call him out."

"At the outset, so the story goes, one contrary galoot kicked because Hicks didn't 'low to drink when he was invited."

"He's planted up yan'!"

"That was how the boys come to notice that thar was somethin' bad in Hicks's eye when ye crossed him. So they says, ef he liked to set up hyar an' suck his thumbs, why, let him set, an' be hanged!"

"So Hicks, he nurses his mulligrubs up hyar all alone; an' the boys, they plays merry Moses to their notion further down the gulch."

"What made him so unsocial?" asked Jim, with a curious look in the depths of his eyes.

"You tell," answered Harry, carelessly.

"How long did such a state of things last?"

"That I don't know."

"Did he find any gold? Perhaps it was because he was discouraged."

"I'm comin' to that."

"The boys hadn't no chance o' knowin' what he cleaned up by what he blew into Pretty Pete's Ranch. He never—"

"Ah! Pretty Pete was here, then?"

Jim glanced about the room in search of the gambler.

"He'd orter be at that thar table," said Harry, indicating the faro lay-out with a glance. "Thar's whar he's held forth ever sence the camp was a camp. He's pulled in, first an' last, most that the boys has dug out o' the ground, barrin' the cost o' their grub an' the duds they wear."

"What fools!" ejaculated Jim, with sudden heat.

"Oh, they had the fun, an' he got the money. That was about as even as things is often divided in this wicked world."

"Go on," urged Jim.

"Waal, as I was sayin', he didn't git none o' Hicks's rocks—not jest then—though they say as he greased the road fur him into his den—"

"Greased it? How?"

"Soft sawder. You wouldn't 'low as Pete had the blarney in him; but he knows his trade. Soft sawder an' the usual devil's decoy."

"What's that?"

"Women."

"Ah!" ejaculated Jim, with a smothered sort of gasp.

"Why, I thought it was you as cottoned to 'em!" cried Harry, wondering that he should be so affected by such an announcement.

"Did Hicks cotton to them?" asked Jim, though the words seemed to choke him.

"Waal, no, he didn't," answered Harry, slowly, watching the effect of this statement on the inquirer, with a smile twinkling in the corner of his eye.

"Ah!" breathed Jim, as if the assurance was a relief. "Now go on, if you please."

"Because," pursued Harry, chuckling, "he

didn't have the rocks! Hicks was dead broke all the while."

"How do you know?" cried Jim, in a tone of resentful challenge. "It may have been because he preferred to save his gold."

"Like as not!" teased Harry, with the inflection of sarcasm in his tones. "But then the boys 'lowed as it wa'n't accordin' to natur'. Thar must be some way o' squeezin' the rocks out of a man, ef he's got 'em. So the boys they comes up hyar, an' hangs around when he's cleanin' up; an' ef they settled on it as it was slim pickin's, you better believe it was. Thar hain't nobody in this hyar world what's got so keen an eye as a gold-digger, when it comes to takin' the measure of a claim what another man keeps peggin' at with his mouth shut."

"Well, let us say that he was poor."

Jim Dandy seemed to settle to this conclusion with melancholy regret.

"I wonder what Hicks was to him?" reflected Happy Harry; but he was too discreet to ask a question which would have been a gross breach of the western code of etiquette.

"He was worse than that," he went on; "he was hungry."

"Hungry!" repeated Jim, with a start, and a quick recession of the blood from his cheeks and lips.

"Oh, that's nothin'," affirmed Harry. "Ef you had worked on grub stakes as often as some of us, an' been whar you'd thank God fur grub stakes or anythin' else, as often as the most of us, you wouldn't be so quick to 'low as a mite o' hunger now an' ag'in would be any great hurt to anybody. He was hungry, an' ragged to boot!"

What was Harry's astonishment to see the humidity of unshed tears spring to Jim Dandy's eyes.

"Waal, I swar!" he ejaculated, staring.

Then, with quick-coming consideration, he resumed, in a changed tone:

"Suppose we drop this hyar?"

"No, no!—go on!" insisted Jim, recovering his outward equanimity with an effort.

"Waal, ef you will have it," complied Harry, "hyar goes."

He had the rugged hardihood of a man who had lived among men of no great sensitiveness. He thought that, if Jim had not outgrown the softness of childhood, it was time that he should be toughened to it. It is the lot of men to endure.

"One day they got a new tune out o' Hicks. They heard him up hyar whoopin' and yellin' as if the devil had got into him—crossways!"

"What was the matter?" asked Jim, breathlessly.

"Matter? He was only swingin' his hat, an' hurrarin', an' dancin' seventeen jigs all in one."

"Had he struck it rich?" panted Jim, as if ready to clap his hands with delight.

"Waal, that ain't fur me to say. The boys 'lowed as he had. But when they come a-runnin', he suddenly shut up; an' drawerin' two hornets' nests what nobody wanted to sample—he swore he'd put enough into the man as come anigh him to sink him plumb through to bed-rock. He was mad, you bet!"

"What did they do—what did they do to him?" urged Jim, fairly seizing hold of Harry's arm in his excited interest; it may have been apprehension for the safety of Hicks.

"Do to him? They give him all the room the law allowed! Maybe you hain't lived hyar long enough to know as men talk business in this section, when they talk loud."

"Go on! go on!"

"Waal, they staked out all around him, an' shook the lower camp so quick you'd think a cyclone had struck it."

"Had he made a strike?"

"Waal, the place panned out middlin' well. The boys staid hyar, ye see. An' Hicks, he built this hyar house—"

"This house?" cried Jim, in amazement,—

"this house?"

"The back part of it—the part ag'in' the face o' the cliff."

Jim recalled that he had noticed that the gambling hall, or the structure of which it was a part, ran back to a perpendicular wall of rock.

"But," he said, "it could be easily ascertained whether he was making anything at quartz mining."

"Anybody would say as thar was no lie in that," admitted Harry. "But, ye see, his claim run from the bluff to the creek. The water has been turned into another bed. But it was jest out yan, then. So Hicks he panned out the bottom enough every day to keep him in grub, an'

the rest o' the time he shuts himself up in his house; an' he might 'a' sucked his thumbs in hyar, fur all anybody knowed what else he done."

"That was strange!"

"But Hicks was queer all round."

"Well, what came of it?"

"The place was called Hicks's Hurrah. That's what we set out fur."

"Very well. What became of Hicks?"

"Pretty Pete laid fur him once more."

"Ah! we're coming round to that villain again."

"Pete laid fur him," repeated Harry, "an' this time he laid fur him bad."

"What do you mean?" asked Jim, anxiously.

"He set Flash the Fire-fly onto him. He caved!"

"Hicks?"

"Hicks! He was human. You hain't seen the Fire-fly yet. Wait. Ah! look!"

Jim looked. What he saw brought his heart into his mouth. But there was something else that he did not see, which would have brought it there even more forcibly, and with a different emotion.

Out of the darkness under the window near which Happy Harry was talking, rose a hideous human countenance, into a half-illumination that made it fairly devilish!

CHAPTER VII.

A TEMPEST IN THE HEART.

FROM her interrupted interview with Happy Harry, Flash the Fire-fly fled away into an inner apartment.

The door out of the gambling hall opened into a room that was in nothing particularly noteworthy. The same was true of the room next *en suite*. But the third room, where she arrested her hurried footsteps, would have chained the attention of any one with surprise.

It was fitted up in a style altogether unwonted in that wild region. It was as if a Parisian boudoir had been whisked through the air by some magician, and set down a quarter of the way round the earth.

The walls, instead of being of plain deal boards, as one would have expected in that region, or papered, as is common in American houses, were hung with satin, laid in plaits, and adorned with pictures, mirrors, and such ornaments as indicate a woman's taste; while statuettes and bric-a-brac stood on shelf and bracket. Curtains of lace, and heavy worsted hangings, were in keeping with a luxurious carpet and a sort of divan covered with a leopard-skin.

Over the back of a chair lay a robe, elegant in fashion and fabric, and beside it, on the floor, were a pair of fairy-like slippers of unmistakable Parisian manufacture.

A guitar leaned in one corner, near an upright piano. On a rosewood table with twisted legs, the embroidered cover of which drooped nearly to the floor, lay scattered several books, while more were in view, suspended against the wall in a set of book-shelves.

The books on the table, evidently in daily use, were a French lesson-book and lexicon, and some volumes of fiction and the modern drama.

A pair of foils and masks lay on a chair, as if recently in use, or held in readiness.

What was this strange medley—the belongings of a woman with nothing in her head but fashionable frippery, coupled with what indicated the application of a student?

But an intruder into this apartment would have been impressed by something stranger still.

The air in it seemed dead. It was only on closer attention that one discovered that this was due to an affection of the sense of hearing.

Coming from the bellowing tempest that reigned without, one noticed that the sound was almost entirely shut out when the door closed at one's back. On lifting the elegant curtains to discover how they excluded even the most vivid flashes of lightning, he would have been still further surprised to find that they were masks covering no windows.

The room was illuminated by a lamp hung in brass chains from the ceiling.

If the roar of the thunder was muffled to a low, rumbling murmur, rather a far than a sound, it was more than likely that no sound from the strange chamber could be heard without.

Then the fact that the room was not square, that the ceiling was tent-shaped, and the recollection that a building ran back to the face of a bluff, would have left no doubt that this was an apartment in the solid rock.

Into this strange cabinet Flash the Fire-fly rushed, and cast herself face-downward on the divan.

For a moment she gripped the leopard-skin, hugging it around her face, while she was shaken by a storm of emotion. Then she arose and began to pace the room like a caged animal.

Flinging herself down on the piano-stool, she swept her lithe fingers over the key-board of the instrument so as to fairly lash from it a hurricane of melodious sounds.

Presently she was interrupted by a voice at her elbow.

"Ah, ciel! Bravo! bravo!"

She flashed round, to find a little Frenchman standing just behind her, who elevated his shoulders and spread his hands, while his head was canted on one side and his eyebrows arched, in a shrug that was expressive of the most complimentary appreciation.

She did not seem surprised at finding him there, having entered her apartment without the ceremony of knocking.

"Monsieur," she said, in a voice that was an impatient command, "sit down!"

And moving the stool she sat on to the right, she swept another to her side, giving it a whirl to lower it.

Diving at a pile of music with an impatience that sent the sheets she did not wish fluttering upon the floor like leaves before a gust of wind, she spread the selected one on the rack of the instrument.

The Frenchman seated himself, and at a sign from her, they plunged into a duet as stormy as the piece she had been playing when he entered.

"The fiend is in her again to day!" declared the little Frenchman, as he worked away for dear life, to keep up with the rush of her insane performance.

In the midst of it she suddenly sprang to her feet, so abruptly as to overturn her stool, crying:

"Enough! enough! What an execrable uproar! Why were we not all born deaf? Stop! stop, in the name of heaven!"

Without a word of expostulation, the Frenchman desisted, and arose to his feet.

"What madame will!" he said.

"Something devilish!" she cried. "I wish I could kill some one! Carmeaux, will you fight me? See! here are as pretty toys as any one could ask. We can take the length of the room!"

And she caught up a brace of revolvers that lay on the table among her books.

"Grand ciel!" cried the Frenchman, grinning till the points of his mustache reached to the corners of his eyes, "how long have I been dying for you! Will nothing suffice? Let it be the rapier, instead."

"Good!" she cried—"and I'll run you through, if I can!"

"In welcome!" he answered, still laughing. "You have given your slave more cruel stabs without number!"

She seemed quite careless of his bantering gallantry, but sprang for the foils with flashing eyes.

"Set back that table!" she commanded, busying herself with rolling an easy-chair from the middle of the floor.

Soon the central space was cleared, the masks donned, and the foils crossed with a clash.

Her onset was furious, so that the agile little man had his hands full to keep her at arm's-length.

More and more determinedly she pressed upon him, till he was panting with exertion.

Suddenly she leaped back, dropped the point of her foil to the floor, set her foot upon it, and tore off its buckskin guard.

"Look out for yourself!" she cried.

And tearing off her mask and scornfully flinging it behind her, she made for him anew.

He knew that the weapon she now wielded with such skill and determination was a really dangerous one—indeed, one that seriously menaced his life. The button had been broken off, leaving a jagged point. He himself had filed a notch around it, to hold the buckskin guard which she had now torn off.

Hotly she pressed upon him, driving him round and round the room, till he began to be seriously alarmed.

"Quarter! quarter!" he cried.

"For your life!" she returned.

And by the blazing of her eyes he realized that, if she could find an entrance into his body for the jagged point of her foil, she meant to do it!

Then, nearing a door, he reached behind him,

tore it open, and leaped through backward, pulling it quickly to between them, yet so closely pursued by her eager thrust, that both her weapon and his own were caught in the closing door.

"Fiend!" he cried. "She would have killed me!"

But the woman had sprung back across the room, and flung herself on the divan, there to lie weeping as if her soul were tearing its way out of her body!

Without the room, while the man she had driven from her presence, fleeing for his life, yet held the door breathlessly, he was come upon by Pete, returning from his quest of the dead bodies Jim Dandy was supposed to have left in the mountain road.

"Ah, monsieur!" gasped the little Frenchman, "go not in there for the present!"

"Why not?" demanded Pete, roughly. "How long is it since I hain't had the free run of my own house?"

"But, ah, madame is—is—is—"

"Havin' a tantrum!" suggested Pete, filling out the stammering Frenchman's sentence for him. "I reckon so."

"But it is terrible—terrible!" panted M. Carmeaux.

"She can't skeer me!" affirmed Pete, bluntly.

"She's made you sweat, hain't she?"

And he laughed brutally.

"You know not. She has sought my life."

"Good! good!" cried Pete. "I've often wondered that, with her spirit, she hain't taken the notion to finish you off long ago. I never see you myself, but I ache to kick you."

The Frenchman grinned sardonically at this insult; but, whether out of consideration for the Fire-fly, or for Pete, he still urged:

"Be on your guard. She is in the mood to shoot you. Has she not threatened it before now?"

"Let her shoot, an' be hanged!"

The Frenchman whispered his warnings. Pete belloyed out his defiance.

Perhaps it was from the fear of this betrayal that M. Carmeaux desisted from further opposition.

"The saints keep you!" he breathed, and fled the spot.

Pete swung open the door, entered the room, and slammed it to after him.

M. Carmeaux had turned at the other exit of this intermediate room, to listen to his reception, but the closing door shut in all sounds.

CHAPTER VIII.

A VILLAINOUS BARGAIN.

As Pretty Pete crossed the threshold, the woman started upright on the divan, confronting him with a face that promised no very cordial reception.

Cheeks and lips were bloodless, and eyes blazed a fierce defiance.

"Waal?"

"Well!"

"What's the row now?"

"There is no row, save of your own making."

"What have I done?"

"What have you done?"

"Nothin', to you."

"You have been playing murderer again!"

The blood ebbed from the livid scar across Pete's repellent face, and returned. But this was a sensitive index of feeling. He had no disguises with this woman, and his voice indicated only angry resentment of the tone she took with him, as he replied:

"Carryin' out your own notion, madam!"

"My notion?"

"Didn't you give me leave to kill him?"

"Give you leave to kill him!" she retorted, with a savage sneer. "When did you ever wait for leave from me to do your bloody work?"

"You've repented of it, eh?" demanded the ruffian, thrusting his head forward with a wolfish glare of his one bloodshot eye, while his fingers began to work as if he were tempted to strangle her on the spot.

To show her contempt for him, she only smiled, with a curling of the lips that had something in it strongly suggestive of the snarling of a wild beast, while she turned her back upon him, busying herself with the arrangement of her hair, which had partly fallen down during the agitated scene through which she had passed.

But this dropping of her guard was only apparent. Standing before a mirror, she commanded a view of his movements, so that, if he had sprung for her, she would have writhed out of his reach, and probably have poniarded him before he recovered.

"Look a-hyar!" he cried, fairly choking with rage, "be you playin' off on me?"

"I'd have little to gain from such a fellow as you!" she replied, with an irritating laugh.

"Little to gain!" glancing around the room.

"Maybe you hain't gained nothin' so fur."

"My salt!" she admitted, contemptuously.

"Salt! Mighty expensive salt! Have you any idee what these hyar jimcracks cost?"

And he waved his hand to take in the furnishing of the room.

"Oh, come! you bore me inexpressibly!" she cried, with a yawn.

"What is all this hyar fur?" he demanded, with the propensity of people of a certain temper to go over matters sufficiently familiar to the person with whom they are quarrelling. "An' hyar's this hyar jumpin'-jack of a frog-eater! What's he nosin' around hyar fur?"

"Ha! ha! ha!" she cried. "Are you jealous of Carmeaux? Come! that's good!"

He did not take up this diverting lead, but kept on with what was on his mind.

"Nothin' will do ye but you must be a swell, as big as the best o' em. You can chin French, an' ye must howl to the planner. It ain't enough fur ye to have that limber-legs I arn ye how to dance, but I'm blowed ef you don't have him to show ye how to walk, an' how to set down, an' how to git up! Blast my two eyes into one, ef ye don't have to tell ye how to pucker yer mouth, when ye say *Me Lawd*, an' *Me Lady*! I've watched ye go through them infernal monkey shines! Oh, you must be a swell, an' ye must go to Paris, an' play high-jinks with the nob's o' the world. An' me? I'm yer husband—oh, yes, I'm yer husband fast enough! But, whar be I while you're swellin' around with *Me Lawd* an' *Me Lady*? I'm skulkin' behind the door, I be, whar nobody sees me! You're a gay young widder, you be, a-swellin' around on my rocks—blast me!—an' nobody knows who or what I be—a scullion, maybe, or a groom, like as not, ef any o' the nob's ever gits the chance to see me. Oh, this hyar's a sweet program, this hyar is—fur me!"

During this tirade the woman had turned round, with her hands busy fastening her hair at the back of her head, while she gazed at the speaker in contempt.

"Why, you ugly monster!" she cried, as he paused for breath, "is it not enough that I sacrifice myself to you in secret, but I must set you at my side before all the world? A fine foil you'd be to my beauty! Beauty and the Beast!"

And she deliberately laughed in his face.

"Will ye do it?" he cried, with a sudden fierce hunger that made her flesh creep with disgust, as, throwing out his tremulous hands, he advanced toward her with eager strides.

In a flash a revolver frowned in his face.

"Keep your distance!" she commanded.

He stopped, so abruptly as to suggest that he was fully convinced that persistence meant sudden death.

"Ye've been standin' me off from the first!" he pleaded, with almost a whine. "You don't never mean to keep yer word—ye know it! Ye've been playin' me, like a fish on yer hook!" "Wait till you have the right to me. It will be bad enough then. I shall never endure your touch without a shudder!"

And she shuddered, as if in anticipation.

"Do ye mean it?" he cried, her frank repulsion rather than her words of promise feeding his hopes. "You will keep yer word?"

"Of course I will keep my word. But you may depend I shall hold you to your part of the agreement."

"Anythin'!" he gasped, passing his hand across his forehead, as if the prospect made him dizzy with excitement. "I'll keep shady. Nobody'll drop to me. You'll be a gay young widder, to yer notion. You'll roll in rocks. Thar won't be no swell fancy flin's to beat what you'll sport. Only—only—"

And now he looked at her with a return of his former doubts.

"Suppose," he said, slowly, "one o' them nob's comes along what ye happened to take a notion to—like—like—this hyar snoozer!"

Now his one eye was blazing with savage jealousy.

"What's to prevent ye from shakin' me like an old shoe?"

Once more his fingers began to work, as if again he was tempted to strangle her.

"And have you step out before the world, and flourish a marriage certificate under my nose!" she cried. "Oh, no! you'll have me fast enough."

"I hain't got no smell o' no certificate yet," he declared.

"The sooner you get it, the safer you'll be!" she retorted.

"I'm takin' it as soon as I kin git it."

"Money down! No money, no marriage!"

He was panting again with savage eagerness.

"I'll wring the heart out of his body!" he declared, making so vivid a pantomime of the operation that the woman's blood ran cold at the sight of it.

Nevertheless, she said, indifferently:

"You've been a long time about it."

"I'll bring things to a head the next time I go fur him!" was his assurance.

Then, as if the thought of the encounter made him impatient of delay, he strode to some hanging draperies opposite the door leading to the gambling saloon, swept them aside, and threw open a door which they concealed.

Through it he stared into black darkness which the rays from the lamp seemed powerless to penetrate.

No sound came from beyond. A chill, sluggish current of air circulated around him as he stood on the threshold. It was as if it came from a tomb.

Into this darkness the woman, too, stared, but with no sentiment of horror in her eyes.

Whatever the pit-like beyond held, she was indifferent to it.

Instead she said, with a frown of doubt:

"Sometimes I half believe he's fooling us!"

"Not he!" declared Pretty Pete, confidently.

"He's got 'em salted down in stacks."

"How do you know?"

"Hain't I seen whar he's took it from? Ye can't fool me when I git my nose ag'in the rocks. I've been thar myself!"

The woman began to pace the floor in excited meditation.

The man watched her expectantly.

Suddenly she stopped, changing her whole tone toward him.

"See here, Pete," she said, confidentially, "one way or the other, bring this thing to an issue. I'm tired of this life. With you, or with somebody else, I'm bound to quit it!"

"With me! with me!" cried the man, trembling with the fear of losing her. "I'll fetch him to taw, I tell you!"

"With you, or with somebody else!" she repeated.

Then, as she drew herself erect, her face alight with proud consciousness of the power of her beauty, she went on:

"Why shouldn't I bury myself in such a hole as this? I can go to any great city in the world, and make make my fortune in a six-month! Why shouldn't I marry a title? It's as easy as anything else. You have only to set your mark high."

The man gazed at her breathlessly. The scar across his ugly visage was ashen white.

She did not appear to be noticing him, wrapped in the picture she had conjured up. If she was observing him covertly, she must have seen by his working features that he was meditating the feasibility of killing her, if it came to the alternative of losing her.

"But go on!" she said, suddenly. "I'll give you a little longer."

"It won't take long!" he declared, with grim resolution.

"And now, how about this other matter? It was you?"

"Who else should it be?" he asked, sullenly.

"Tell me about it."

"Thar ain't much to tell. I took five o' the boys, an' waylaid him."

"And he got away with six of you!" contemptuously, and with a gleam of exultant pride.

"Thar was another galoot jumped in on us. I fetched him the first clip. We had him solid. Then, whisk! an' somethin' broke loose right in the midst of us. I've seen shootin'. I have, but you don't often git it the like o' that! Bill Nixon is dead. The Bruiser ain't nowhar. He won't last to-morrow out, ef he hain't knocked under already. Mahaffey is winged in a way that will give him somethin' to nurse for the rest of his nateral life. Jack an' Sam Bazell cut an' run, like the cowards they be! It's in the fam'ly, blast 'em!"

"And you?" asked Flash, with a curious look of contempt out of the corner of her eye.

"I looked out fur number one. Why shouldn't I? They left me standin' up alone."

"Face to face with a single man. You said you had already downed—him."

There was a sort of gasping balk over Happy Harry's name.

"I come away," said Pete, doggedly. "I know my business."

"Who is this terrible fellow who got away with you all so easily?"

"You kin look him over fur yerself," answered Pete, dropping his glance sullenly.

It was not an easy thing to tell her that it was a mere strapping.

"Where is he?"

"You look out fur Happy Harry. You won't be long nosin' him out. The other chap won't be fur off, I reckon."

Ignoring the sarcastic fling about Harry, Flash answered:

"I'll go now."

Traversing the intermediate room to the one next the gambling hall, she put her eye to a small spy-hole which gave a view of the room beyond.

Jim Dandy, as we know, was in conversation with Happy Harry, drawing from him the story of Hicks.

"What! that lad?" she cried, when Jim was pointed out to her; for, in quest of some one with the promise of unusual prowess in his build, she had quite overlooked him.

"Boy or man," responded Pete, doggedly, "he's chain lightnin' with a revolver."

"Say!" she cried, suddenly and sharply, "whom does he look like?"

"Look like?" repeated Pete, putting his eye to the peep-hole. "I don't know. Who does he look like?"

"The eye you have left isn't of much use to you!"

"Who, then?"

"I'll tell you later! Meanwhile, it's time that I went on. When do you propose to get that fero table to running? Have you calculated what it costs us an hour to have it stand idle?"

"I'll open her up now."

"Hold on. Look there! They've thrown that window up. Go outside, and find out what all that confidential conversation is about. Do you hear?—it will pay you to keep an eye and both ears on that sprig."

Pretty Pete crept away to his post under the window, and at about the time he reached it, the Fire-fly made her appearance on a small stage that occupied the end of the gambling saloon.

She was greeted with a deafening roar of applause, as all crowded forward to witness her performance close at hand.

Happy Harry and Jim Dandy were now left quite alone, so that apparently they could pursue their conversation without the fear of being overheard.

Under the window Pete chuckled silently.

CHAPTER IX.

A STARTLING INTERRUPTION.

PRETTY PETE'S gambling-house was a slightly-built wooden structure, a mere barracks, unceiled, and with the rafters and tie-beams visible from below.

There were two entrances, at the corners of the front end of the building, the space between them being occupied by a brilliantly-illuminated bar. Here decanters and glasses of various shapes vied with gilt-framed mirrors to dazzle the eye.

The space in front of this bar, for a quarter of the depth of the hall, was free from obstruction. The next quarter of the floor space was occupied by gambling tables, where one could get amusement in exchange for his money at any game that he preferred. The half of the room beyond was devoted to dancing, with a stage at the end opposite the entrances.

When dancing was in progress this stage was occupied by some half-dozen musicians, who retreated to the wings when there was anything to be exhibited in the way of singing or fancy dancing.

Upon this stage Flash the Fire-Fly appeared at a bound.

She had made a change in her dress, her former toilet having sustained some damage in her fierce bout with M. Carneaux.

The draperies of an Oriental dancing-girl were well calculated to set off her peculiar style of beauty, and her movements, as she executed the sword dance, were such as must captivate any eye. Never was more sinuous grace displayed before sultan or bashaw.

The boys went wild over the performance, and showered the stage with gold.

"Hah! you ruffians!" cried the girl to herself. "Have I such power over you? I can sway better men as well, never fear! I have seen that Frenchman's eyes gleam. It was not all affected. Nor was it all because he is a Frenchman. These movements, guessed at by the sweep of a princess' train in a salon of fash-

ion, will bring quick heart-beats in other breasts."

How her eyes blazed as she forecast future triumphs in a world far different from that in which she now reigned!

Looking over the heads of all between, she saw Happy Harry's face light up with admiration, and the cheeks of the youth beside him flush and pale by turns.

"I'll see more of you, my Adonis!" she said to herself, as she scanned Jim from head to foot.

"Who is that?" asked Jim, as if this were his first sight of her.

"That?" replied Harry, a little absently.

"Oh, that's Flash—Flash the Fire-fly."

"A suggestive name," remarked Jim. "And a good one for a variety actress."

"Eh!" ejaculated Harry, in a tone of surprise. Then, with a change:—"Waal, I suppose she is; though, somehow, I never happened to think of her in that way before."

"Why not?"

"Waal, really, I don't know. I suppose it's because she seems to belong to this hyar place—exclusive, so to say. She sings an' dances—that's so. But then—"

And he broke off, as if the thought were too indefinite for expression.

"But then what?" urged Jim.

"Waal, now, you've got me, fur a fact!" answered Harry, with a puzzled laugh. "I reckon you would call her an actress. Only, ye see, we've got to thiakin' of her as Flash—that's all."

"You mean you have got to thinking of her as Flash—that's all!" mimicked Jim, with a sudden accession of color to his cheeks, and a flash of the eyes that was not particularly favorable to the subject of discussion.

"Me! Oh, no!" protested Harry, yet quite carelessly. "She ain't nothin' to me."

"You're sure of that?"

"Didn't I tell you I steered clear o' that kind o' craft?"

"You might tell me anything!"

"Then I'm a liar, am I? I'll call you out—when I'm feelin' better," laughed Harry.

Then he went on:

"Ye see, she kind o' belongs to the crowd, an' I'm one o' the crowd."

"Belongs to the crowd!" cried Jim, opening his eyes.

"Oh, hang it all!" protested Harry. "You don't wait fur me to fall before you pick me up. She's an institution o' this hyar burgh. We pit her, fur good looks, or anythin' else ye please, ag'in' the world. We put up our money on her. We swear by her. We'll fight fur her. She's our big card."

"Does she belong to any one in particular?" asked Jim, in a curious tone of voice.

"Waal, to Pretty Pete, I reckon, as much as to any one."

"Good heavens!"

Jim stared with amazement and incredulity.

"To that—that—"

Harry laughed.

"He ain't harnsome," he admitted, "but he's got the rocks. He's been skinnin' us boys ever since thar was any of us in the place to skin. I reckon, though, her partnership with Pete don't go beyond money matters. They make a healthy team, don't they?"

"Is that it? She is his decoy? And they divide the proceeds of their joint rascality?"

"I reckon that's about the size of it."

"And—you were saying that he used her to decoy Hicks?"

"I don't know how she got around him, but she done it. She brought him into Pete's den, an' Pete, he clawed him!"

"Won all his money?"

Jim turned his face so that Harry could not see it as he spoke. His voice, however, to one more attentive than Harry, might have betrayed the fact that he was choking with some emotion. It might be anger; it might be regret.

"Clawed him him down to the bone!" declared Harry.

"But you said that there was some mystery."

"Waal, that came after. I reckon nobody hain't got the exact rights of it."

"What is known, and what is suspected?"

"Waal, thar was a fallin'-out, an' pistols fur two. Hicks called Pete a cheat, an' Pete give him the lie. Then they blazed away. Thar was jest the width o' the gamblin'-table between 'em. But I reckon each was too skeered o' the other. Anyway, they was both in too big a hurry. Joe Munk, he got one o' the slugs in his bread-basket. It didn't agree with him. He's up yan. Ike Hooper was a-settin' thar, not doin' nothin' to nobody. You never see a jaw like his'n after

that. It never was no manner o' use to him, though he'd been a bad man to git away with on jaw before."

"And Hicks?" cried Jim breathlessly. "He was killed?"

"Waal," answered Harry hesitatingly, "not jest then."

"Why do you say not just then? What became of him?"

"Perhaps I shouldn't orter put it that way. To tell ye the truth, I don't know whether he was rubbed out or not."

"Speak! speak!" cried Jim, seizing Harry by the arm, and fairly shaking him. "What are you trying to keep back from me? You may tell me. I can bear it. Anything! only tell me the truth, and tell me at once."

Happy Harry stared in astonishment.

"Oh," he said, apologetically, "I didn't know as Hicks was anythin' to you."

"Never mind what he is to me. I thought you were to do as I wished, without stopping to pry into my affairs."

"That's so, pard."

"Then tell me what you know."

"That ain't much. Ye see, it was jest this hyar way. The boys knowed as Pretty Pete was a rip-snortin' tornado when he broke loose; an' as I told ye, they had seen that Hicks had a bad look about him when he was excited. They hadn't seen him on his nerve, only when he snuffed Toby Parsons's candle fur kickin' when he declined to drink, an' then that time when he 'lowed the crowd was goin' to raid him to see what he was hurrahin' about. But, that was enough as a sample. They 'lowed, when they heard the lie pass between him and Pretty Pete, thar was bound to be the biggest kind of a time."

"Now, a man don't have to be long in the diggin's to 'arn that, in a general massacre, the crowd as is standin' around comes in fur the lion's share o' the lead. You see, it's about as easy to hit one man as another, an' generally a heap sight more so."

"So the boys they jumps fur the lights, an' then they jumps fur the winders."

"The queer thing about it," continued Harry, dropping his voice and speaking more slowly, as if he were even then trying to puzzle the matter out—"all the boys says it—after the lights went out thar wa'n't no more shootin'. Two shots, both together—*che-bang!* A yep out o' Joe, cut short; a holler out o' Ike that went clean down to yer boots; then *puff!* darkness, an' the devil take the hindmost!"

"But Hicks?" cried Jim, as Harry came to a full stop. "What became of him?"

"You tell!" answered Harry, with a mystified look straight into the other's eyes.

"What do you mean?" gasped Jim, staring.

"Exit Hicks! That was the last seen or heard of him!" answered Harry, slowly shaking his head.

"But, how is that possible? If he was killed, he would be there. If not—why, if he was such a terrible man as you say, he would stand his ground, and fight it out."

"That's what he didn't do. Some o' the boys 'lowed as he was skeered out, an' run clean away."

"Abandoning everything that belonged to him?"

"Pete had cleaned him out. Thar wa'n't nothin' belongin' to him but his hide. Yes, thar was the clo'es he had on."

Jim uttered an ejaculation of dismay at the picture of utter destitution that this correction of Harry's called up.

"When the lights was turned up," pursued Harry, still dwelling on the matter, "he wa'n't nowhar!"

"And that was absolutely the last?" panted Jim, his lips bloodless, his eyes glistening.

Harry looked at him steadily for a moment, and then concluded:

"You might as well know all that's whispered, though I don't see as it amounts to much."

"Yes! yes! let me know everything! That which seems irrelevant may be the clew to the whole mystery."

Jim hung upon Harry's next words with ears and eyes wide.

Out in the darkness, was another, half-raised into the light which came through the open window. His face was as eager as Jim's. He waited as breathlessly.

"Thar ain't but one as pretends to have seen it," was Harry's answer. "It was Billy Blakely, an' he told me himself, or I should never have known it. He swore he never whispered it to anybody else. He wasn't hankerin' to git Pretty Pete in his wool."

"Yes! yes!" cried Jim, irritated by this delay. "But, what was it?"

The words were trembling on Harry's lips, when there was a startling interruption.

"Waal, I swar!" ejaculated a voice quite close to the window.

The next instant there was a rushing sound, a yell of terror, a collision of heavy bodies, a gurgling cry, a groan, a fall, then footsteps in swift flight!

Jim Dandy and Happy Harry stared at each other in a moment of breathless dismay. The yell had been so nearly into the window, and of so unmistakable a character, that every one in the hall turned from the contemplation of the Fire-fly's intricate evolutions to stare toward the spot.

With a bound Jim reached the window, thrusting his head far out into the darkness.

"Jim! Jim!" shouted Happy Harry, warningly, "you'll be shot! Come in hyar—curse you, come in!"

It was an admonition of affectionate solicitude. In the rough life of the West one readily gets to using strong expressions, not always appropriate to his meaning.

But, Jim paid no heed. Dazzled by the light of the room, he could see nothing: so with a light bound he cleared the sill, and was outside, whatever the danger.

CHAPTER X.

A COOL INTRUSION.

"OUT thar, every mother's son of you!" shouted Happy Harry, starting to a sitting posture, in spite of a stinging pain that shot through his wound as if he had been pierced anew with a poniard. "Out thar, an' save that boy! He's my pard, boys! He's a blame fool; but don't let him come to harm!"

This too out of his affection.

There was a general rush for the doors.

Flash stopped in her languid gyrations and swooning flexions, and stared at the backs of the fleeing spectators, and from them to the window through which Jim Dandy had disappeared.

She knew what those in the crush and Babel of that jostling mob did not know; but, her eye not being on Jim, at the moment of that yell, she did not know whether he had been at the window at the time of it.

"Did he drop to Pete; and has he shot him?" she asked herself.

In the confusion, she did not recall whether there had been a shot or not.

"If he is dead!" she gasped, her heart leaping into her throat.

What possibilities did she contemplate, contingent on Pretty Pete's death?

Her face was suddenly irradiated, as she fixed her eyes on Happy Harry. But, as suddenly the look died out, to be replaced by one of intense ferocity.

"I'll carve the way with my dagger!" she said to herself.

Then she stood listening intently. Her eyes were straight before her, but attention was directed behind.

Suddenly she spoke aloud:

"Bah!"

Then she became her old self, looking upon the interruption as if she were careless of the result.

Out in the darkness Jim Dandy soon stumbled upon the body of a man lying motionless on the ground.

But this was not what he was after. He had expected so much. What he wanted besides was the eavesdropper and murderer.

At the risk of getting a shot at every step, he ran about, revolver in hand, as if to flush his human game.

He found nothing. He heard nothing. He saw nothing.

Soon he was joined by the mob.

"Lights! lights!" he cried. "Let us track the villain!"

At a thought he rushed back to the window, crying:

"A lamp!—pass a lamp out here!"

As has been said, the storm had come from the other direction. There was a current of air, not strong enough to extinguish a well-burning lamp, blowing out through the window.

It was handed out by some who had rushed to the window rather than risk their skins out of doors, and, sheltered under Jim's jacket threw a flickering illumination on the ground.

Jim saw that a path had been beaten alongside of the house. Unfortunately, even since the rain it had been traversed by more than one pair of feet.

He followed it to a rear door of the building, which had a rain-drenched and muddy sill.

How old were the tracks on the sill? It was impossible to tell.

"Where is the proprietor of this place?" demanded Jim. "He ought to know about what's going on at his very door."

And he put his hand on the latch.

"Hold on, kid!" interposed one of the men, seizing Jim's arm.

"What's the matter?" asked the latter.

As he looked up into the face of his detainer, the lamp lighted both their countenances, and then with a flare went out.

Jim saw that his suspicions were read by the miner, whose voice was friendly.

"You don't know the guv'nor," said the latter, dropping his voice. "Don't make nor meddle thar. Take a fool's advice!"

"All the same, I'm going in," said Jim, quietly.

"Hold on! One word! Harry told us to keep you out o' mischief."

"He did, eh?"

"You bet! Come away, little pard."

"Who are you?"

"Bob Whiskers."

"All right, Bob. Follow me!"

And Jim deliberately lifted the latch, and crossed the threshold.

"Blast your leetle eyes!" muttered Bob Whiskers.

But, whatever condemnation this formula expressed, he nevertheless pressed closely after Jim.

Jim made up his mind that he had a determined ally, whatever befell.

But the rest of the crowd had sufficient respect for Pretty Pete's sanctuary to stop at the door, most of them edging away so as to leave a clear space directly behind Jim and Bob.

The room which they entered was the one directly behind the stage. Flash the Fire-fly might have heard the opening and shutting of a door in this room before they opened it.

It was dimly illuminated by a lamp turned low.

As they entered, a man leaped from a pine settle, and stood at bay, snatching a brace of revolvers from a belt that lay upon a table at the end of the settle where his head had been.

His coat was off, and his boots stood side by side against the wall at the end of the settle.

He had the appearance of a man who had lain down to rest, and just been startled out of a nap.

"Who's hyar?" he shouted. "Stand, or I fire!"

"Hold on!" protested Jim Dandy, not losing his nerve at all. "There is no call for pistol-practice just now."

"Is that you, you hop-o-my-thumb?"

"What there is of me is here. Can't you see me?"

"I kin see you!" replied Pete, understanding Jim to use the word *see* in the sense in which it is used in the game of poker. "What do you hold?"

"Only a little pair," replied Jim, catching on.

"An' what do you want around hyar with your dirty leetle pair?"

"I came to call you," said Jim, coolly. "There has been a man murdered under your window, and I thought you ought to know about it."

"Waal, I don't know nothin' about it!" declared Pretty Pete, in a tone which made Jim feel morally sure that the ruffian, by the sense in which he took the words addressed to him, betrayed himself.

However, he had already seen enough to know that there was no evidence to be got against him which would be good in that community; so he skillfully turned the words to another meaning.

"Of course not. So we have come to tell you. You're the proper man to look into the matter. You own the premises, don't you?"

"You bet yer sweet life I do!" declared the ruffian, with unnecessary heat.

He felt that Jim was challenging his right, and he meant to make it clearly understood that he held himself in readiness to maintain it against all comers.

"I didn't hyear no shot," he said. "I was snoozin', I reckon."

And he went to put on his boots.

"There was no shot," observed Jim. "I reckon it was done with a knife."

And, in spite of the implication, seeing his chance, he coolly stepped to the table, and drew Pretty Pete's bowie from its sheath—

using, be it observed, his left hand!—and remarking, in a tone as cool as his action:

"This is a pretty piece of steel you have here."

The truth was, that Pete was watching him out of the corner of his eye.

The moment he saw the blade, Jim said to himself:

"I have fallen into a trap! He's only too glad to have me look at this."

The blade bore no traces of blood. However, it was plain to an unprejudiced eye that it had recently been thrust into the ground. There was mud on the guard.

"The rascal cares nothing for suspicions," said Jim, to himself, "so long as he isn't caught dead to rights."

"I'm glad you like it," said Pete. "It's a thing I wouldn't play with, ef I was you, though."

"I am the more inclined to play with them," returned Jim, "since I"—with a significant stress on the pronoun—"can turn them to so little account for business purposes. I have to place my dependence upon a toy that calls for less strength, but more skill."

Then he carelessly thrust it back into its sheath, and as carelessly turned away.

He smiled quietly at the group of amazed faces dimly lighted through the doorway. The men, who have never before to-night seen Pretty Pete bluffed, were yet staring in dumb astonishment at what they called his "cheek."

As he went out among them, he hummed the air to which Happy Harry, earlier in the evening, had sung:

"Thar went a big fightin'-mans loshin' around," etc.

"Waal, he takes the cake!" declared one of the miners, under his breath.

"Harry said as he was a Jim-dandy," supplemented another, "an' blow me tight ef he ain't!"

"Pete could break him in two!"

"Ef he could git his holt!"

They brought the eavesdropper's victim into the house. He was unconscious, but moaning and writhing feebly.

At that Pretty Pete's scar was a page that Jim Dandy seemed fond of conning.

There was a great rushing about to find the camp surgeon, the place being ransacked in every direction.

Jim Dandy set himself to torture Pretty Pete with the fear that, on the recovery of his victim, he would be denounced.

The ruffian essayed several awkward schemes to get a moment alone with the wounded man, but was quietly baffled, till he was goaded to the verge of driving his knife into him a second time, before them all.

The surgeon came at last. His efforts gave the poor fellow one more moment of consciousness. He opened his eyes, stared around, fixed them upon Pretty Pete's face—the ruffian having drawn near him, as if impelled by an irresistible fascination—and so died, looking at his murderer, but unable to speak.

With an involuntary sigh of relief, Pete went into the back room, and again threw himself on the settle, this time wiping the cold sweat off of his forehead, with the air of a badly used-up man.

Out in the gambling-hall Jim Dandy asked Harry for the conclusion of his story.

"That fellow knows that we are on his track," he said, looking into Harry's eyes, and speaking as if the matter were settled between them; "but he was cheated out of catching what you were about to tell me. Now let us have the clew."

"Billy Blakely told me that, at the moment when the last light went out, he saw Pretty Pete jump over the table, an' grip Hicks by the throat."

"And where was Pretty Pete when the lamps were relighted?"

"He lighted 'em himself, an' invited the boys to come in an' go at the game ag'in."

"As if he feared no further disturbance from Hicks?"

"As if Hicks was four foot under ground!"

"And was nothing ever done about it?"

"Waal, the boys talked some."

"In whispers, I suppose?" answered Jim.

"Pete's an ornery man to tackle, an' that's a fact."

"But what did they think about it?"

"Some 'lowed as Pete had planted him in the cellar. When a galoot as had got enough corn-juice in him to make him fresh asked him whar he had planted Hicks, Pete he only laughed. But it wa'n't a good laugh to see, the boys says."

"What became of Hicks's property?"

"Pete gobbled it up, of course."

"The mine and all?"

"Hain't he won 'em? Who had a better right?"

Jim groaned.

"This hyar's the place, whar you're settin'," continued Harry. "Hicks had a lean-to ag'in the cliff. Pete he built this hyar hall so's to take in lean-to an' all."

"Then he tore Hicks's house down, and there is nothing left to show what it was like?" observed Jim, his tone indicating a wish that he might have seen just how Hicks had lived.

"I didn't say that," answered Harry. "He had the hall built outside o' the lean-to, so's to take it all in. It may be standin' yet, fur all I know."

"Where?" exclaimed Jim, opening his eyes in surprise.

"In yan," replied Harry, with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the rear part of the building.

While Jim stared toward the stage, Harry went on:

"Pete he lived in Hicks's dug-out while the hall was bein' built."

"That was strange. Hain't he a better place of his own?"

"Oh, yes. But he said it was his notion. The boys 'lowed as he was guardin' gold that he believed Hicks had buried in the shanty. He wouldn't let them as built the hall touch it. He said he'd manage to pull it down himself, if it ever got in his way."

"And he has held undisputed possession here ever since?"

"You bet yer sweet life! Who was thar fur to call for a show of his hand?"

"Well," said Jim Dandy, with sudden resoluteness, "I'll tell you my business in this section. I've come to look for Hicks, and I want you to help me find him."

"Whar air you 'lowin' to look? Above ground, or below?"

"Both!"

"Then you're 'lowin' as he may be to the fore yet?"

"He had something to live for; and I don't believe it would be denied him."

"Oh, don't you bet no chips on that kind of a proposition. A mighty few high lots would do us, if no man was rubbed out till he'd got his work—what he's sot his heart on—done."

"Will you help me look?"

"Wasn't that the agreement?"

"All right!"

And they shook hands on it.

As the surgeon came to him at last, Happy Harry, to prove his little need of him, hailed him with:

"I know a young lady of Kalimazoo,

Who has a proposal to marry a Jew.

The Jew is a vender of second-hand clothes.

An' it goes without sayin' he has a hook nose.

Then what would you

Advise her to do.

This charming young lady of Kalimazoo?"

CHAPTER XI.

HICKS.

We are apt to associate the idea of darkness with the thought of night. We picture to ourselves a gloom in which one may grope, amid objects that are visible only as dimly-looking shadows.

But imagine a world on which the blessed sun has never shone; which has never been silvered by the moonlight; whose utter darkness has never been pierced by the ray of a single twinkling star!—a world in which the patter of the rain, the rustle of the leaves, has never been heard; where the dead air responds only to the earth-rocking roar of the thunder, and that so muffled and far away as to lose its distinctive character.

Hark! In the darkness, which seems to press close about like something tangible, a bellowing sound, like the cry of some wild beast, maddened by terror.

Whence it comes, it is impossible to guess. It is all about the startled listener. It seems to dwell in the innermost chambers of his ears. It dies away reluctantly, like a groan. The silence after is indescribable.

Once more! But now it is a yell of diabolical laughter. It sounds hollow, as coming from the cavernous chest of death. A horde of ghouls re-echo it, some promptly and with fiendish sympathy, some as if but half roused from a sullen drowse.

Listen! Surely that is a human voice! It is some one in the agony of prayer: now in the vociferous declamation of one exhorting sinners

to flee from the wrath to come; now breaking into a rollicking song!

Then, after a long, breathless pause, a low, moaning plaint:

"I am goin' mad!—my God! I'm goin' mad!"

This is followed by a burst of frantic execration; and then sobbing, and moans, and sighs.

"Hah! a light! a light! thank God for that!"

No lost mariner ever bailed with wilder ecstasy a speck on the horizon, that promised safety and the solace of human companionship.

There is a shuffling sound, of some one groping his way amid impediments unseen, but making their presence known by cruel thrills of pain.

Within the narrow circle of sickly illumination shed around by that point of light, which seems to be fighting a forlorn hope with the encompassing darkness, a trembling wretch falls upon his knees, extending his hands in glad welcome, as he might bathe in the warm sunlight when chilled to the bone with cold and dampness.

"Ah! ah!" he ejaculates, with a keen relish.

"That's good! that is good! Give me more of it! I could drink it in like water! It's better'n any whisky you ever see! Don't take it away ag'in, pard! It leaves the place full o' givin' devils! You don't know! Hell ain't nothin' to it!"

Only the bearer's legs are visible in the light of the lantern. Nothing is illuminated on which the light does not fall directly. The black darkness of the cavern swallows up every ray that falls into its insatiable maw.

The suppliant lifts his dazzled eyes to where his jailer must look down upon him, and the look of hopeless pleading on his ghastly features is enough to move a heart of stone.

But Pretty Pete had not a heart of stone. It was a human heart! Wild beasts are not more implacable than man!

"Keep this hyar in mind, whether ye see it or no," he said, with no touch of feeling in his harsh voice.

And into the light he thrust the gleaming blade of a bowie-knife.

Then he stood the lantern on the floor of the cave, and sat down on an outcropping spur of rock.

The pitiable wretch before him—clothed in rags, with matted hair, and skin grimed with filth—rubbed his trembling hands, and feasted his bloodshot eyes on the flame of the candle.

"What 'ud you give fur yer full o' that?" asked Pete, after a pause spent in contemplating this misery, without the relaxing of a muscle in his iron face.

"Give!" repeated Hicks, for it was no other.

"What 'ud I give? I'd give half my grub—the hull of it, as long as I could stand it! Say, Pete! is it a bargain? Give me the worth of half my grub in candle-ends! Hold on! Don't say nothin' yet! I hain't done! I'll go on half my allowance o' water! I'll let you give me the cat-o'-nine-tails—five lashes fur a bit o' candle so long."

And he indicated the first joint of his thumb, knowing that a great deal of cruelty was the equivalent of a very little mercy with Pretty Pete.

"Why, blast you!" retorted Pete, justifying his estimate, "I put the lash to you whenever I want to, as it is!"

There was no denying this. The suppliant looked dejected, as if conscious that he had nothing else to offer.

"Look a-hyar, Hicks!" burst out his captor, "what a blame fool you be, to be sure! What in Cain be you roostin' an' hyar fur, when you kin git out as easy as not?"

Now Hicks drew away in sullen defiance. He even took his eyes from the light, and cast them on the floor of the cavern, beneath a resolute frown.

"Now you're down in the sulks ag'in," said Pete. "That shows jest what I told ye. You don't larn nothin', even when it's licked into ye with the cat. But that's what I'm hyar for—to tap that hide o' yours an' let out bad blood till you cry 'nough. Ef I don't make you cheerful, I'll make you sing, an' dance, too!"

"Don't thrash me no more, Pete," pleaded the other. "You couldn't stand it yerself. I'm about played out, I be. Look a-hyar."

And standing before his ruthless persecutor, the victim held out his trembling arms.

"Come down, then," commanded Pete.

The wretch frowned, and sat down on a rock, as if resigned to bear the worst his captor could inflict.

"Ye won't do it?" urged Pete.

"Never!" declared Hicks, setting his teeth.

"Hold on, before you make up yer mind.

I've only been playin' with ye so fur!"

"Ef you call that playin', I'd like to know what you would call gittin' yer work in!"

"You shall know, ef you stand out fur it."

"You can't no more'n kill me."

"Oh, yes, I kin! I kin cut the soul out o' your body every day, till you 'low as it 'u'd 'a' been money in your pocket ef you'd been dead long before I ever put my hand to ye."

"You git no good by it."

"I'll have the satisfaction; an' that's some-thing."

"You devil!"

"Oh, you needn't look at me that way. Ef wishin' was havin', I'd 'a' been sent up the flume by more'n one galoot as I'd got onto."

The speaker reached down, to draw from his boot-leg a short-handled cat-of-nine-tails.

But with the cry of rage of one who has suffered all he can endure, and now turns upon his tormentor, Hicks sprung toward him, advancing with jumps, his legs being hopped so that he could not stride.

How impotent was this man, with nothing but his hands free, and they weaponless!

With an oath, Pete struck an upward blow, taking Hicks under the chin, and knocking him off his feet, so that he fell on the broad of his back.

"Kill me! kill me!" he cried, in an agony of despair.

"No fear o' my killin' ye! But I'll wake ye up, you bet yer sweet life."

And drawing the cat from his boot-leg with his right hand, he with his left tore away the scant covering of rags from his victim, leaving him bare to the waist, and fell to lashing him vigorously.

The helpless sufferer lay perfectly still, without sound or motion. He knew from past experience that outcries of pain, instead of moving its inflicter to mercy, only increased his enjoyment.

"Blast ye! I'll see ef I can't fetch the music out o' ye!" cried the big brute.

And turning his victim over with his foot, he began to lash him on the arms and breast.

Hicks sheltered his face with his hands, till the lash found its way through some interstice.

Such agony was unendurable; and writhing to his knees, the wretch sought to seize his fiendish tormentor by the legs.

He received a brutal kick, which for a moment dazed him. But the lash stung him into renewed consciousness, and shrieking with rage, he dove for his torturer once more.

His movements impeded by the hopple, he was besides too weak for battle, offensive or defensive. The heavy boot, a fist like iron, and the scorpion stings of the cat, reduced him to helpless subjection.

In the midst of it all a pitying scream cleft the hideous noises of the conflict, and a woman's fluttering garments swept forward.

"Oh, cruel! cruel! cruel! Have done! He is nearly dead! How can you cause such suffering?"

Pretty Pete turned with a savage oath.

CHAPTER XII.

A SUBTLE DIPLOMAT.

"WHAT be you doin' in hyer?" demanded Pete, striking off the restraining hand with which Flash the Fire-fly—for it was she—had seized his arm.

"I came to see what it was *you* were doing in here. I heard these unearthly cries, and knew you must be murdering some one."

"How did you come to hear anythin'?"

"You left the door open."

"An' you come spyin' after me! But ef it was open fur you to come in, it must be yet open fur you to go out. You cut dirt out o' this, or I'll give you a touch o' the cat fur your trouble!"

"Touch me with the lash?" cried the woman, drawing back with the air of an insulted queen. "I dare you to lay the weight of your finger on me!"

"You do, do ye? Waal, hyar's fur luck, anyway!"

And the ruffian raised his cat.

"Look out, Pete Monaghan!" cried Flash, dropping her voice to a hiss of concentrated fury. "You never stood so near to the Judgment Seat as you do this minute!"

"Ho! it's *that* game, is it?"

"It is that game, if you insist on it."

"You daren't shoot me!"

"You have proved that you dare not strike. Come! I'm only a woman!"

"Not much of a woman, you! You're a she devil!"

"The better suited to treat with you, you human monster," and her eyes scintillated as with real fire in their lenses.

"Will you git out o' this?"

"You undertook to drive me out."

"Waal, you kin go out anyway. You kin do no good hyar, an' you ain't wanted."

"Wanted or not, I'm here, and I've come to stay till I have put an end to this fiend's work."

"Don't meddle with me, woman! This hyar ain't none o' your funeral."

"I'll make it my business, then! You sha'n't touch him again with the lash."

"I'll not!"

"No, you won't—not while I can lift a hand to prevent it."

"Look a' hyar! You're interferin' with my business. Thar's rocks in this hyar. Keep yer hands off, I say!"

"Rocks or not, you'll not get them that way."

Then, with a sudden change of manner, from defiance to argumentativeness:

"See here, Pete, if you wasn't as big a fool as you are a brute, you would see that no good would come of this. How long have you been lashing him in this way?"

"Ever since I've had him hyar."

The woman uttered a cry of horrified protest.

"All these months!"

"All these months?" mimicked Pete. "He kin end it as soon as he pleases. It's his obstinacy. You never see no government mule the like of him."

"If he has held out so long, do you suppose he'll ever give up?"

"I'll cut the heart out of his body if he don't! Do you think I'm chicken-hearted? I kin stand it as long as he kin; an' I will, too!"

"Oh, no! There's nothing chicken-hearted about you!"

"Rocks, or blood! That's all I've got to say."

"Leave him to me—"

"To run him off? You can't git him out o' this without goin' through the house; an' you'll never do that while I'm—"

"I will get the gold that you're ready to do worse than murder for."

"I'm ready to do anythin' that'll fetch it. But, why should he give in to you, knowin' that the rocks goes into my pocket, anyhow?"

"Let me try."

"Honest?"

"Did I ever lie to you? I don't think I'm afraid of you enough for that, yet awhile!"

"Go in! Ef you kin fetch him, that's all I want."

"Then, you clear out, and leave me to myself."

"If you try to cut the dirt out from under my—"

"Will you go?"

"Good-day to you! But, blast ye! remember I'd just as soon knock a woman in the head, if she come any funny business on me—"

"Go! go! go!"

Pete turned away, leaving her with the man who had not lifted his head to look at his mediator.

Flash the Fire-fly knelt down beside him without touching him.

"Hicks," she said, dropping her voice to a broken tone of regret, "I want you to forgive me for my part in this. Will you believe that I never dreamed of its coming to anything like this? I've helped to swindle more than one man out of his money. But, it never went any further. He was free to go and dig more, to make up his loss. And if I didn't get it, somebody else would. Since the night you turned on us, I have never dreamed that you was anywhere near. We all supposed that you had cleared out. It is only by the merest accident—Pete has never left the door open behind him before—that I found you. And is it possible that you have been shut up in here all this time, and he been scourging you so?"

"Curse him!" ejaculated the suffering man, "if I had the life of Methuselah, an' made every day a day of torture, I could never git even with him fur what he's done to me!—or with you either! You brought me to this!"

Now he lifted his face, distorted with hatred, and glared at her.

"No," she protested, "I never brought you to this."

"Didn't you lure me into his den, curse you?" cried the maddened man.

"Not for this," still urged the woman. "I have come to save you from any more of it."

"From the lash? Ha! ha! ha! Will you give me back my gold?"

And Hicks dropped his head on his arms once more, and burst into tears.

Flash stared at him in astonishment.

"Are you such a miser as that?" she cried. "You might stand this rather than give in to him. But is it for the gold, and *only* that?"

"The gold! What do you know about my gold?"

"Very little, to be sure! But of you, I know that you're a meaner spirit than I took you for, and I'm half sorry I interfered—"

"To save me from the lash, after having turned my life into a hell! Go away, an' leave me alone!"

"No! Now I've set out on it, I'll see the thing through. Do you realize what a fool you are to try to stand out against Pete Monaghan? He'll stick to you as long as there's a breath of life left in your body, and he'll scourge you every day of it."

"He'll never see the gold, though! That's one comfort."

"Have you gold hidden here somewhere that he's after?"

"Hyar or elsewhar, let him find it—or you!"

"But what good will it do you after you're dead, man?"

"I'll never do him any good, whether I'm dead or alive."

"Now listen to me! I can understand that feeling. I like it better than standing out just for the greed of the gold. But, listen to me, I say. Pete won't let you die easy. He'll whip you just as much as you can stand and live. He'll drag you along till you curse the day you was born!"

"I've done that before now. I reckon I ain't the only one as has had good reason to do it!"

"Hicks," persisted the girl, as if with a sudden resolve, "if you'll cave, I'll tell you something. I don't want this thing on my conscience. Now that I've seen you, I couldn't sleep o' nights, thinking of you down in here. How horrible!—it's *all* night with you! A night, weeks—months long!" and the Fire-fly shuddered without dissimulation.

No one loved the gay sunshine more than she. She was a creature for light and warmth. It made her blood run cold to think of Hicks's experience in that hideous prison.

"How long is it since you have seen the sunshine?"

"How should I know?" cried the wretched man. "It may be a year. It seems as if it was twenty o' 'em!"

"It's every day of three months! I should have been dead in three days! Ay! if I had had this to look forward to, I should have killed myself in three hours!"

The man only moaned.

"Do you know what has been going on out in the world?" pursued Flash. "It is springtime—the last of spring. It is almost summer. Fifteen minutes ago I was sitting out on the sunny side of the house—"

"Oh, you don't know, do you?" suddenly breaking off. "Pete has had a dance-hall built so as to take in your dug-out entirely. The money he won from you paid for it. But that's neither here nor there. The dance-hall is there, and I was sitting in the sun, as I told you."

"Well, there were two birds, one in a tree right over my head, and one a hundred, or maybe two hundred yards off. I reckon the one by me was trying to charm the other. You never heard such singing."

"And the flowers— Well, here are some that I gathered, little dreaming what use I was to make of them. You can judge for yourself."

From the bosom of her dress she took a nosegay. It was only half a dozen of the simplest wild-flowers, with a green leaf or two. But how the man stared at them as she put them in his hand!

"The colors don't show much in this candle-light," she observed. "You should see them with the sun on them."

"The sun! the sun!" repeated the prisoner, with something of a return of his half-insanity. "It is as warm—that is, when you get under shelter—as if it were June."

Her very qualification brought out the scene she had pictured more vividly.

"The sunshine! oh, the sunshine!" breathed the poor wretch, clasping his hands about the flowers as if to embrace them. "If I could see the sunshine once more!"

"Why can't you? You have only to say the word. Give up this gold, that can do you no good. You can get more, or get it back from Pete after you get out. Come! I'll give you a stake, and you can try your luck again. Who knows but you may clean him out as he did you? All I ask is my peace of mind. I can't leave you in here; you'll never get out till you cave. Here's the stake in your hand."

And she took from her bosom some money tied in a handkerchief.

"Never!" cried Hicks, wildly. "Curse that thief and swindler! but a thousand times more curse his tables and all the villainous instruments of his iniquitous trade! If heaven were to be won, and hell were mine, I would not stake it! If I ever look upon a card again without execration, may Heaven's lightning blast and shrivel my eyes in their sockets! What misery have they brought me! Oh, Mary! Mary! Mary! will you ever forgive me?"

And dropping his face into his hands once more, he fell into such agony of spirit that it seemed as if his soul would shake itself free of its weakened tenement.

"Sol! We're coming to the woman at last," reflected the Fire-fly. "Then we're near the pith of the matter."

And certainly it seemed that she had precipitated some crisis; for, suddenly leaping to his feet, the man flung out his arms, and cried:

"Look at me! See these rags, this filth, these welts like whip-cords, this torn and quivering flesh! Ah, could you but see the scars on my soul! Do you know what has brought me to this?"

"Don't accuse me again," pleaded the woman, covering her face with her hands, as if shrinking from the sight of what her treachery had wrought.

"Bah!" scoffed the man. "You were but a pebble in my course! I was on the road to this hell of horrors, or another like it, before I ever saw you!"

"What brought you to it, then?"

"I'll tell you!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A MAN'S FALL.

"My home was in San Francisco," began Hicks. "I was engaged in a small, but promising business, and had every prospect of a successful and happy life. I owed no man a dollar, and could look any man fearlessly in the face.

"The death of a relative whom we had never seen, brought my sister and me a joint bequest of twenty thousand dollars. That turned my head. The demon of speculation seized me.

"A friend of mine invested ten thousand dollars in a mining stock which everybody swore was going to the dogs, and in two weeks' time cleared fifty thousand!

"I said to myself, I would put my sister's portion where no mishap of my own could reach it. The rest I had a right to risk as I chose. If I lost it, I could be no worse off than before. If I won—Ah, if I won! I had in my mind's eye the house of the banker Ralston!

"Well, I began—cautiously, at first. What tremblings! What sleepless nights! What mad delight when my broker slapped me on the back, and declared that I had a genius for speculation, or was the luckiest dog he knew!

"I did not tell my mother or sister what I was doing. I thought to surprise them some day, by taking them out to a magnificent estate, a new house, with grand furniture, and carriages, and servants, and then, while they were admiring it, to tell them that it was mine—theirs!

"For six months, as if the devil was laying a trap for me, everything I put my hand to turned to gold. The business to which I had given all my thought and time, was now so trifling that I left it to the management of a clerk, and kept it up only as a blind to my mother and sister.

"For six months I lived in a mad whirl of dizzy success. Then came a shock. My friends advised, I laughed at their fears, half suspecting their sincerity. A man would sell his brother on change! Here was the opportunity of my life. I flung in every dollar I had in the world.

"How can I tell you of the next day, and the next, and the next! Down! down! down! as if seeking the bottomless pit! A hundred thousand dollars that a paltry five thousand would save!

"A hundred thousand? If I could but hold out, I was sure to realize a quarter of a million!—a half million! The money was in it! I knew it!—or thought I did! Five hundred thousand dollars for the want of five thousand!

"Should I break my resolve? Should I take my sister's money? It was for but a day, or two at the outside. I would have no occasion to repeat it. I would quadruple her fortune. Yes, she should have an even fifty thousand,

On my mother I would settle a hundred thousand, beyond all chance of loss by any speculation of mine. And all hanging upon the use of but half my sister's portion.

"I had but to state my need. I knew she would place the whole at my disposal. Her generosity was equal to her love for me. But give her a moment's anxiety, one sleepless night!

"I took the five thousand. It stopped the crevasse for twenty-four hours! Then I threw in the rest, to save myself from the infamy of having robbed her I loved best, who had trusted me blindly.

The next day, with ruin staring me in the face, I turned to the business I had neglected, and almost forgotten till then.

"Not by dishonesty, but by incapacity, it had been run into the ground. I could realize a little money by selling it out, but not without robbing my creditors.

"I had already robbed my sister. My mother's little mite—only a few hundreds—had gone with the rest. Why be more considerate of strangers? This last drop might turn the scales of fortune. I wanted to believe it, and I told myself I did believe it. I lied!

"I raised the money, and it held me for an hour!

"How I read the remorseless figures, when every click of the demon ticker was a stab to the heart!

"My broker urged that I must have friends who would stand by me. I had! God help me!—I victimized the confiding ones!

"Then came the crash! I was a ruined and dishonored man!

"During ten hours of darkness I told myself I was hanging between drowning and blowing my brains out. But I lied! I had not the courage for suicide. Instead, I fled away to the mountains, swearing I would never look into the faces of those I had wronged till I could make full restitution when asking their forgiveness.

"I came here; and you know the life that surrounds a miner. In that six months I had learned to drink and gamble. The old peaceful life of simple pleasures had given place to a mad race for the mere intoxication of excitement.

"That is why I worked like a galley-slave at the oar. That is why I kept by myself. I was morose because fortune seemed to flee before me. While others found gold, only to throw it away like fools or children, I toiled day after day without reward.

"At last the tides turned. I took this cave for a shelter because my ragged tent would no longer stand between me and the storm. I explored it because it seemed as if I should go mad without some diversion of the thoughts that preyed upon me. I found the bed of an underground stream, dry except when the torrents swelled it so that it could not all be led off through the new channel it had broken for itself. The bottom was rich with gold.

"Then madness seized me. I rushed into the open air, and shouted my secret to the four winds of heaven! It brought the camp down upon me, as you know. Then I awoke to my folly.

"It was too late to dissemble, but that an accident came to my aid. The claim that had till then yielded me but a bare subsistence, suddenly began to pan out with sufficient richness to justify my excitement.

"The crowd settled about my door, a few better paid than they had been, but the mass held only by delusive hopes. So dust was thrown into the eyes of many, but Pretty Pete was not satisfied. From that hour he spun his web to ensnare me.

"You, curse you!—you were the bait that took! How did you bring me to listen to you? I knew that you was set to destroy me; yet I dallied with the subtle poison you instilled. Oh fool! fool! fool! I laughed at you. I told you to your face that I saw through your mercenary motives, and that you could not catch me with your beauty or your honeyed flattery. Fool that I was, instead of spurning you, I stopped to toy with you. You humored me to the top of my bent, and won! One hour at the gambling table, and I was yours and your master's, body and soul!

"From that moment hell reigned in my heart again. When I caught Pretty Pete at fraud, I would have killed him. After the exchange of shots which harmed neither, he seized me, and by his superior strength choked and beat me into unconsciousness, and brought me hither.

"What have I suffered in the hell of mental as well as physical torment! Look at this body!

Do you think that that is the worst? That fiend incarnate has lashed me until there is not a square inch without its network of welts. I have suffered hunger and thirst and cold. No slave was ever worked as he has forced me to toil under the lash. I have guessed night from day only by his absence; and then, through the unnumbered hours, every muscle has been a sleepless reminder of his cruelty; every joint has been a suggestion of the rack.

"But do you think that that is the worst? In dreams—for I have slept in spite of all—the bowed head of my mother, my sister's look of wondering, wistful reproach, have made me long to bury myself beneath some falling mountain. And then I have heard your bantering laugh, as, throwing a flower over your shoulder at me, you have vanished away in the darkness.

"Now hear me!"

And he lifted his clinched hands, as if invoking Heaven as well to witness.

"If ever I listen to you again, or to your like; if ever I look upon a card but to curse it and all who have anything to do with; if ever I seek to take a farthing from any man without rendering in return a fair and just equivalent—may the—"

"Stop! stop!" cried the woman, extending her hands in superstitious terror. "I only ask you to save yourself."

"I will! I will!" he shouted in return. "But not as you propose. I will fight that devil hand-to-hand, and you shall supply me with the necessary weapon!"

And with a bound he seized her, to wrench from her the only instrument with which he could hope to cope with his brutal captor.

Flash the Fire-fly was taken by surprise. She, usually so quick, was helpless in his grasp before she could lift a repellent finger.

Being a woman, she uttered a shriek of unmistakable womanly fear, so paralyzed by the sense of helplessness that she could not struggle.

He would have dispossessed her without resistance, but at that instant a pistol-shot woke the dead echoes of the cavern, and a whistling bullet crashed through the glass of the lantern, and snuffed out the flame of the candle, wrapping all in instant darkness.

With a howl of terror, Hicks let go his captive, and cowered in the darkness, as a slave crouches at the crack of the master's whip.

Then came a hoarse laugh of derision, while the affrighted Fire-fly fled blindly, she knew not whither—anywhere away from the spot.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE INVASION.

"I know a young lady of Russian descent, With a crossing of Welsh from her mother.

Oh, if to my pleadings she would but relent, We'd soon change her name for another! The kaff we'd knock off, and the rest of it We'd shoot with a dynamite bomb, An' then, while we had the best of it, We'd send it to Kingdom-come!

"No speaker can speak, an' no speller can spell, The name of my beautiful Welsh-Russian belle.

"Twill be a cold day When she gives it away, An' whoever gits it will think—"

"Hold on! Ho-o-old on!"

"Waal, I furgit the rest of it, anyway!"

"Will think it's a sell, so he will!"

And the laugh went round uproariously.

"Hallo, Terry Donovan! Is that you?" cried the improvisitor.

"Sure, it's no other!"

"Waal, that jest reminds me:

"Thar was a young Limerick laddy Who didn't know mammy from daddy;

An' any one's sister, He caught 'er an' kissed 'er, Not knowin' he did it—the Paddy!"

"Oh, faith! that's nothing at all. I kin do the better o' that meself!"

"You kin? You're a bold laddy-buck!—far beyond yer namesake. Jest bark to him!"

"Thayre was a young colleen—I'll not tell yez who!— That loved a gay callant—ye'll guess at that too!

But divil a wan o' me Could find the man o' me To whisper *Me darlint!* in highway or lane,

Though she'd simper an' sigh at me, An' the blink of her eye at me

Says:—*Swaite Terry Donovan, phwat do ye mane!*"

At that the boys "got on to" Terry, and fairly ran him out of the room.

As if bubbling over with gayety, Happy Harry went on:

"Come drink with me, Johnny! come drink with me, Joe!
Is it pistols, or bowies, or sherry?
I'll drink with a friend, or I'll fight with a foe;
An', t'other or which, I'll be merry!
Come Jack, or Come Joe!
Will ye fight me, or no?
Is it pistols, or bowies, or brandy?
Be ye friend, be ye foe,
I say it's a go!
At t'other or which I am handy!"

"You are both handy at making rhymes, and merry withal," said a voice at his elbow; and Harry turned to confront the Jim Dandy.

"Why shouldn't I be merry?" he demanded. "Doc has plugged up that hole in my hide, an' says I'm all right fur another round."

And, his muse taking her inspiration from any thought that happened to flit through his mind, he resumed:

"He thought it was empty—that's always the plea.
He only in fun pulled the trigger.
His sweet little brother, light haired an' aged three,
Will never grow any bigger!"

But the sober expression on Jim Dandy's face checked him at last.

"Waal, my lad, what is it?" he asked, abruptly breaking off his singing.

Instead of answering, Jim walked out of the saloon.

Harry followed him without verbal invitation.

"Now, then?" said he, when they were beyond the danger of being overheard.

"I am ready to move on the enemy's works," declared Jim, quietly.

"Pretty Pete's! I'm with you, of course, though I'd say you had better take the night for it."

"I think differently. I have been nosing about and studying that gentleman's habits."

"The deuce you have! Waal, they're mighty bad habits, I'll go my pile."

"They are unusual habits. They would surprise his friends. But of them presently."

Jim looked at his companion's face so searchingly that Harry almost lost countenance, as he laughed, somewhat uneasily:

"What the deuce be you after, pard? Out with it!"

"Will you tell me the truth, or will you lie to me?" asked Jim, coolly.

"Waal, I'll be blowed!" cried Harry, in amazement. "If you wasn't my pard, I'm a duffer if I wouldn't knock you off your pins! Fur unadulterated cheek—"

"It is your peculiarities, not mine, that are under discussion," said Jim, nothing daunted.

"Fire away, an' be hanged to you! What do you want to know?"

"The other day you said you had no particular tenderness for women."

"Oh, waal, I'll take that back," answered Harry, unblushingly. "I'm fond of the lot of 'em!"

"Are you in love with—with this—Fire-fly, as you call her?"

Jim held his face to a stony expression, but his voice betrayed some agitation by its unsteadiness.

"Whew!" whistled Harry, in sudden amaze. "Be you?"

"I'm" cried Jim.

And once more his voice was significant—this time of indignant disgust.

"I only asked," said Harry, quietly, "because, if you be, I'm ready to leave you a clear field."

"Don't trouble yourself," cried Jim, scornfully. "I'm not taken with that peculiar style of beauty myself."

"Waal, then, what's the use of sayin' anythin' about it?" demanded Harry. "If you don't want her, an' no more do I, we have no quarrel."

"You are sure that you don't want her?"

"Waal, ef I did, you bet I wouldn't leave her with Pretty Pete long."

"Would you—would you handle her roughly, if she stood in your way?"

"Waal, I hope the Lord will mop the ground with me till he wears me up to the shoulder-blades, if I ever put a harmful hand on any woman!" cried Harry, with the warmth of true chivalry.

If Jim was particularly affected by this sentiment, he certainly did not show it.

"I suppose that depends," he answered, coldly.

"Why, you miserable little whelp!" cried Harry. "Would you abuse a woman?"

Strange to say, Jim did not resent this certainly ticklish disparagement.

"What if she were up to some mischief that could be prevented in no other way?" he asked.

"A woman can do as much harm as a man, set her at it."

"So they kin, bless 'em! The jades do most o' the mischief o' the world."

Happy Harry did not seem to be troubled by his inconsistencies, if indeed he was conscious of them.

"Suppose," said Jim, measuring his words deliberately, "this particular woman stood in the way of our carrying out the business that I propose to enter upon, would you clap your hand over her mouth to keep her from giving warning by a scream, and then bind her and gag her?"

Harry scratched his head, as if in a quandary.

"She's a blame purty woman, to handle in that way!" he declared, frankly.

"And thinks a great deal of you," added Jim, with undisguised spitefulness in his voice.

"You're a tarnal tarantler, pard!" declared Harry. "What I mean is, you strike like a wasp."

"Never mind me. We're talking about you and your Fire-fly."

"My Fire-fly? She's none of mine."

"Oh, no! That's the reason you're so tender of her."

"Why, blast ye! would you have me jump on her rough-shod, as if she was a man?"

"And mar her beauty? By all means, no!"

"Don't spit at me, Jim. What's the matter with you? What have you got ag'in' the Fire-fly? Blow me if I don't believe you're in love with her yourself, an' jealous of me, or any other man that she looks at!"

And Happy Harry roared with laughter at the thought.

"We're getting away from the point," said Jim, collectedly. "Will you do what I want you to, or not?"

"You're pressing me hard, pard," answered Harry. "Won't anything else do ye?"

"No."

"Then I'll stand by our agreement. I'm a burro hitched with my ears in the sleeves of your coat!"

"No!" cried Jim, with sudden vehement protest. "I don't want you to be driven by me!"

"We'll turn it about, then," said Harry, complacently. "Anything to oblige!"

"Come!" cried Jim. "We're doing no good palavering here! We are going to penetrate that monster's den, and you must do whatever the situation seems to require."

"Now you're shoutin'!" declared Harry. "You might know I'd do that. But have you counted the cost of bein' caught in thar uninvited?"

"I have!"

"You mean kill, if it's necessary?"

"I mean kill if it becomes necessary!"

"It will be, if we run across anybody."

"It may be, if we come upon Pretty Pete."

"He won't down without a bullet through him, an' through him in a bad place."

"So much the worse for him."

"Lead off, then! I'm with ye!"

The time was not far from ten in the morning.

Without more words Jim Dandy led the way directly to the rear of Pretty Pete's establishment, choosing the northern side, the kitchen being on the southern.

There were underbrush and trees overrun with creepers growing quite close to the house, the builders having taken the trouble to cut away only those that obstructed their work.

Behind one of these clumps of foliage Jim Dandy stopped, posting Harry just out of sight in the shelter of one a step or two remote.

A signal whistle then brought a quick response. A window was thrown up, and a girl's head thrust out, her sparkling eyes reconnoitering the vicinity eagerly, while the flush on her cheeks showed her pleasure and confusion.

Jim Dandy attracted her eye by a wave of his handkerchief, and a moment later she came tripping out of the house to his place of hiding.

"Oh, you rogue!" she whispered, archly, yet plainly half in earnest. "What do you come bothering around me this time of day for? Do you want me to lose my place?"

"I don't want to lose my place. Have you kept it for me, you pretty vixen?"

And slipping an arm about her waist without a with-your-leave or by-your-license, Jim proceeded to find out for himself, "his place" appearing to be located midway between her nose and chin.

There was a suppressed scream, so carefully suppressed that it would not have startled one thirty yards away; a momentary scuffle; and

then a smacking sound, which suggested a box on the ear; the whole concluding with a laugh and the admonition:

"Do that again, sir, if you dare!"

"By special request?" cried Jim Dandy.

And the offense was repeated quicker than lightning.

"Waal, thar ain't nothin' slow about him at that game!" reflected Happy Harry, not without admiration.

"Have done, or I'll scream for help!" threatened the girl.

"And lose your place? Maybe you're in want of another."

"Not of your offering, Mister Man!"

"Come, now! You don't half dislike me!"

"Dislike you? Why should I? But you ain't the only man in the world, I'd have you know!"

"That's dying for you, you mean, by the toss of your head. I can well believe that. But I'll tell you what. I can, and I will, get away with the best man of them that dares to step between us two! What do you say to that?"

"Well," with a flash of admiration in her eyes, "by the way you mounted Pretty Pete—But there! you're vain enough without my saying anything more!"

"So you were going to say something that would add to my vanity? Don't say it! Your looks are enough for me!"

"Keep off, sir!—keep off, I say! I never in my life saw such a fellow for not knowing his place!"

"When I see it! Oh, but I do; I'll prove it to you."

"I don't want any of your proof!"

"What makes you provoke me to it, then, by doubting me? Do I know it, or don't I?"

"Yes! yes! yes!"

"And it is mine?"

"Oh—"

"No, it's nor but's! It is mine, eh?"

"Yes! yes!"

"And nobody's else?"

"No! Would I bother with more of the like of you!"

"I hope not. But that's neither here nor there. If it is mine, as you admit, you can't blame me for claiming what's my own. So here goes again!"

"Oh, you divil! What a fright you've made of me! Do you think I do up my hair as easy as you have pulled it all about my head? Is this what you've come bothering around for?"

"Partly. I like to see your cheeks red. Then I thought I'd happen around to make sure that nobody was stealing a march on me. Oh, you needn't think that I'm likely to let any one get any points on me! I'm jealous as a Turk! I give you fair warning."

"And do you think I'm going to be watched like that?"—with fine indignation.

"There's no true love without a spark of jealousy! But, Kitty dear, if I didn't believe you'd bear watching, I wouldn't waste my time on you."

"Well, I suppose you're satisfied now, and will go off, and leave me a minute's peace."

"Not I! I've come to have a little talk with you. But this isn't the place for it. Haven't you a snug little corner somewhere in that big house where we can chat without interruption?"

"Oh, I daren't!"

"Of course you dare. They're all out of the way, according to your own account, at this time of day. It's the best hour in the twenty-four."

"But there's the cook!"

"Peeling potatoes! We won't trouble her; and she'll return the compliment by not troubling us. Come! come! say you don't want to, and have done with it! I'm off!"

"Wait, Jim! wait! You know I—I—"

"Enough said! My dear, I'm yours forever! Shall I carry you, or will you—"

"You dare to touch me!"

And she whisked out of his reach, as if half-fearing that it was a risk to depend upon any limit to his boldness.

However, the flash of her eyes over her shoulder, as she ran, was proof that this quality was not displeasing to her.

Jim quickly followed her, pausing at the door to signal Happy Harry to follow him.

So was the enemy's camp invaded.

CHAPTER XV.

INTO THE WOLF'S DEN.

KITTY was all in a flutter of mingled delight and fears. Like everybody else in Hicks's Hurrah, she had heard the prowess of Jim Dandy lauded to the skies on every hand. She had seen the respectful and admiring glances that

followed him, as he walked quietly amid the crowd, with none of the swaggering self-consciousness that was commonly displayed by an acknowledged "cock of the walk."

There never was a greater coquette in the world than this same Kitty Meredith; and when she saw, as she supposed, that her piquant beauty had captivated the dashing young hero, she would have led him a pretty dance, but that he had a devil-may-care way with him that made it impossible to play hot and cold with him. It ended in an almost unconditional surrender on her part. He had his way, because he always claimed it so confidently.

Now she led him into an apartment which afforded close enough quarters for any lover. It was nothing more dignified than a cross between a pantry and a general store-room.

"This is the best I can do for you," she laughed. "Look out for that flour barrel! Do you want to bear away a mark that will tell the whole camp where you have been? There you go again, knocking your head against that bam! Ha! ha! ha! You'll have the whole house down on us! Was there ever anything like a man?"

"In your estimation? I think not!"

"Now, don't you begin again! You'll have to behave! There's only the dining-room between this and the kitchen—"

"God bless the builder that made it so long!"

"But there's worse than that. The madam will hear you if you make the least speck of noise."

"Fugh! There's how many doors between us and her?"

"Only two. Hush! What's that?"

"Nothing, you goose! What makes you tremble so? With delight at having me all to yourself!"

"Don't flatter yourself, sir!"

"It's immensely flattering to be here at all! There! you owe me one for that!"

"I tell you, I—"

"Nonsense! She's fast asleep!"

"Indeed she isn't. The Frenchman is giving her her lesson, and he may be out here any minute."

"Then we'll be as still as two mice till he gets by. But will you know when he's coming?"

"Oh, well, he may not be out for a minute or two."

"I thought not! Ha! ha! ha! Meanwhile, I suppose Pretty Pete stays in there to watch him, hid in the closet."

"I ought not to have told you anything about Pretty Pete. My long tongue will get me into trouble one of these days."

"Don't worry about that. It's your pretty lips that should cause you twice as much anxiety. Heigho! they bother me—"

"Hark! It is surely some one coming! Oh!"

For the door opened, and Happy Harry entered at a single stride, closing it softly behind him.

"Who told you you might come in here?" demanded Kitty, crimsoning with angry defiance, as many people will when caught in an embarrassing situation.

"That's all right," said Jim. "It's only my pard."

"But I haven't taken up with the lot of you!" protested Kitty, with pardonable warmth.

"Not in the same capacity, I hope and trust!" laughed Jim, "though he's a better man than I am, and I wonder at you're not giving him the preference."

"I'll leave him for the madam, if you please!" declared Kitty, spitefully. "I reckon you've lost your way!"

"Oh, no!" laughed Harry.

And then, with a profound obeisance of mock gallantry:

"The mistress hath money and houses and lands, And many to sue for her favor;
But I woo the maid with the dimpled white hands,
For naught but the beauty God gave her!"

Kitty rewarded his compliment with a scornful toss of her head, though a flare of color in her cheeks and a furtive glance at her hands—which certainly merited the tribute—showed that she was not seriously offended.

"Let us save the rest of that for another time, when we have more leisure," said Jim, with a sudden assumption of business-like promptness. "Kitty, dear, Harry and I are here on an errand that has no trifling about it; but it is one that will give you a chance to show your devotion to me, if you really care."

"What is it?" asked the girl, with quick-coming seriousness.

"We are going to invade Pretty Pete's house."

"You don't mean—"

"But I do. We're going in, whether he will or no; and we're going to find out what he is hiding from the world."

"And do you think that I will betray—"

"It does credit to you to turn against me. You're a good girl, and I'm the last to blame you for loyalty. I hope you'll be as loyal to me, some day. But there are times when even loyalty must yield. If it is right that I should be here—"

"You have been using me!" cried the girl, her voice shaken with indignant pain. "You've never meant a word you said! What a fool I was to believe it! You have only been playing with me, to get me to help you to rob—"

"Do you believe that?"

Jim looked steadily into the girl's eyes—so steadily as to call her to a sudden halt.

However, she declared, firmly:

"I'll never do it! I'll call—"

"You'll think better of it," said Jim, quietly. "Remember, we have come in here with our lives in our hands."

There was a covert threat underlying Jim's words; but, loving him, the girl had no fear of him, and it did not occur to her that she might be violently restrained by him and his pard.

"Go out as you came," she proposed, "and I will say nothing."

"Of course you cannot expect us to forego our purpose," answered Jim. "I expected this opposition from you; but I calculated upon inducing you to yield in the end. You have seemed—"

"That's over!" declared Kitty, sadly, yet firmly. "You have trifled with me. I'll never do anything to harm you; but I'll never help you to this."

"You have but to keep quiet—"

She turned her reproachful eyes full upon him.

"Do you know what you're asking?" she demanded. "Pretty Pete would murder me! But that's neither here nor there. I wouldn't do it, anyway. But it only shows how little you care what becomes of me, so long as your own ends are accomplished!"

"And do you think I would leave you to the revenge of that wretch? I propose to bind you and gag you—not so as to hurt you, however; but only to make it appear that you were not a consenting party to our invasion."

"Bind and gag me!"

For the first time the girl showed symptoms of fear, turning pale and shrinking from him.

"To save you from suspicion. You can't believe that I would harm you?"

"Oh, no! You haven't hurt me already!"

With that bitter reproach tears sprung into her eyes, and she covered her face with her apron.

Jim Dandy looked confused and ashamed.

"We haven't time to discuss this now," he said. "In the future I hope to make you think better of me than you do now. Will you let me tie you, so that Pete will think that you were taken prisoner by us?"

"You don't dare to tie me!" cried the girl, suddenly facing him, with the old boldness of a sweetheart to her lover.

But as she gazed into his set face, she realized that, after all, the measure of a woman's strength is the value set on her favor. If he was willing to lose her rather than be turned from his resolve, then she was powerless.

With a sob she bowed her face in her hands again.

Jim stepped forward and gently drew her hands into the position for tying.

"Don't! don't!" she protested. "I'll call for help!"

"For your own sake, if you no longer care anything for me, you'll not do that. You'll not force me to violence that neither of us would ever forget or forgive. If we can steal upon Pretty Pete, there need be no violence to any one. But we're going in, no matter what it costs! If you necessitate bloodshed, you will be responsible for it all."

"Would you murder me? Has it come to that?" cried the girl, breathlessly.

"No. We should kill no one, save in self-defense. But a single cry from you now might make the difference of life and death to Pete, or to one or both of us. It certainly would not prevent our entrance yonder."

"But the Fire-fly and Monsieur are in there. You can't get by them without raising an alarm."

"We'll look out for that."

"Capture them, as you have me, I suppose!"

Without reply Jim crossed her hands behind her, and Harry tied them scientifically.

When it came to her feet, she showed signs of

revolt, but thought better of it, and submitted. However, Jim could not meet her reproachful eyes when the gag was put into her mouth.

"Don't think too hard of me!" he lingered to whisper, when Harry had preceded him out of the store-room.

She turned away her head unforgivingly, and he hastened after his pard.

Having already learned from Kitty the arrangement of the rooms of the house, Jim made his way directly to that next back of the stage. Crossing it on tip-toe, he listened at the door leading toward the innermost chamber.

There was no sound of any one in that apartment, nor could the door to the next be open, if anything was going on in the last of the suite.

Jim opened the door noiselessly, and repeated his investigations at the last door.

"Listen to that! What do you make of it?" he exclaimed, turning to Happy Harry, who had kept faithfully at his heels.

Harry put his ear to the door, and heard some one within snoring.

They would have heard nothing through that barrier, but that it was imperfectly closed.

"I'm goin' it blind," responded Harry. "You hain't told me what you expected to find, except maybe a chance fur fightin'."

"I expected to interrupt a music lesson, possibly; but not that kind of a one," answered Jim. "However, it's perhaps as well. Are you ready?"

For answer, Harry pressed before his companion, before Jim was aware of his purpose, and opening the door, was the first to cross the threshold, and to incur whatever danger their unbidden intrusion might expose them to.

A quick look of appreciation showed that this generosity was not lost on Jim.

However, they found only the Frenchman, fast asleep.

In a moment Happy Harry was at his side, with a hand clapped over his mouth, and an arm that held him as in a vise.

"Hold on, my Christian friend!" he whispered, in the ear of the startled sleeper. "Those that give the least trouble live the longest! Take this hyar kindly!"

And for a moment seizing the Frenchman's throat, he pressed a gag into his mouth, and soon had him secure.

"It ain't necessary for you to give no opinion in this hyar matter, nor to ask any questions," he added, as he put the finishing touches to his work. "We'll run the thing jest the same, whatever you think about it."

"One question," interposed Jim. "Where is the Fire-fly?"

Monsieur looked at him with an expression meant to intimate that he would not have gratified his curiosity if he could.

Happy Harry coolly put the point of his bowie at the Frenchman's throat.

This argument admitted of no reply, and Carmeaux jerked his head toward the door which Pretty Pete had opened into the dark beyond during his interview with the Fire-fly.

"Both of them are in there?" asked Jim.

Carmeaux bobbed his head.

"Now," said Jim, producing a dark-lantern from under his coat, "we have two courses. We can light our way, and take the chances of perceiving the light of our enemies before our own is discovered, or we can grope in the darkness, and run the risk of being betrayed by noise. In either event we run the risk of losing ourselves in a cave about which we know nothing. What do you say?"

"Chance it in the dark," answered Harry, without hesitation.

"Come on, then!"

And, fastening his dark-lantern at his belt, so as to be at hand when needed, Jim put out the light in the room, then swept aside the hangings, opened the door, and stepped into the unknown beyond!

Harry followed, and joining hands, they began to grope their way cautiously forward.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE "DROP."

HICKS had been so long exposed to the torture of solitude and darkness, that it had completely broken his spirit. The instant the light went out, the old insane terror seized him, and he cowered in abject helplessness.

Powerless in his grasp, the Fire-fly too had lost her nerve—she who scarcely knew fear so long as she was free to defend herself with her revolver in which she had unhesitating confidence.

She was recalled from her panic-stricken flight by Pretty Pete's derisive laugh.

The ruffian coolly struck a match, and re-lighted the candle he had so cleverly snuffed.

"So you're achin' fur a chance to lock horns with me, be ye?" he asked, contemptuously scanning the wretch who was now as docile as a whipped cur.

"The light! the light!" cried Hicks, ecstatically, rubbing his hands as if it diffused warmth around.

"He ain't much better'n a fool," observed Pete to the Fire-fly, who now came up, though still tremulous with her fright. "He'd got away with ye, though, only fur me. Do ye like him better'n me?"

"I don't know but I do," replied the Fire-fly.

"I'm sorry I didn't leave you a while longer, then!"

Flash shrugged her shoulders.

"Waal, whar's the secret you 'lowed to squeeze out o' him?" demanded the ruffian.

Still Flash disdained to reply to his sarcasm.

With an oath Pretty Pete drew the bloody cat from his bootleg, and struck at the crouching victim of his cruelty, snarling:

"Git up out o' that! I'll take it out o' your hide, one way or another!"

With a cry of submissive protest, Hicks scrambled out of his reach, and stood awaiting his commands.

"Git that pick an' shovel, curse you!"

Hicks took up the now lighted lantern, gazing at the wavering flame with glistening eyes, even though he thereby ran the risk of not being able to skip out of the reach of the cat with which Pete struck at him viciously.

Near at hand he found two shovels and a pick, which he threw over his shoulder and carried before his master to another part of the cavern, where the floor of sand bore the marks of having been dug over.

Here he fell to work under Pretty Pete's direction, Pete himself not disdaining to use the other shovel.

"And is this the way you employ him?" asked Flash the Fire-fly, with some astonishment, and not a little contempt.

"This is the way I employ him," answered Pete—"to better purpose, I hope, than the way you employed him."

"It would pay you better to break fresh ground, I should think, than to work over old tailings."

"No doubt—if I was workin' over old tail-in's."

"What do you call that?"

"I'm diggin' fur what this whelp has buried. He's got a heap of it somewhars, ef I kin hit on to it."

"So you make him dig for it a part of the time, and whip him to make him tell where it is between whiles?"

"That's my leetle game. Do you know a better?"

Flash the Fire-fly was silent, as she ran her eye over the space which would have to be dug over in this sort of search.

But a voice out of the darkness answered for her.

"I know a game worth two of that!"

With a cry of alarm Pretty Pete dropped his shovel, and whipped his hand around to his back for his revolver.

But the voice, in the dispassionate tones in which so many a deadly warning has been spoken in the Wild West, cautioned him to discretion in that proceeding.

"I've got the drop on you, my Christian friend! Don't play boy, and get hurt."

"It's the Jim Dandy!" gasped Pretty Pete.

Then, with a sudden burst of rage:

"Go fur him, Flash! He can't hold us both. If he shoots me, nail him by the flash of his shootin'-iron. If he shoots at you, it'll be his last."

But another voice now showed that the darkness held more than one. Jim Dandy had a backer.

"A fool is a feller as kicks at the drop,

Or don't know the thing when he sees it.

A wiser galoot keeps his paws off his pop,

An' caves, when he hears the word—*Geeeee it!*"

The effect of this sing-song doggerel on the Fire-fly was the reverse of the singer's design and expectation.

Perhaps he didn't understand the nature of a woman. Perhaps he didn't know all that had passed in the Fire-fly's mind and heart while watching his association with his new pard.

However that may be, the sound of his voice seemed to goad her to a paroxysm of insane fury.

She uttered a shriek of concentrated hatred, and, reckless of consequences to herself, whipped out her revolver, and poured a succession of

shots—not in the direction whence Happy Harry's voice came, but toward the spot where Jim Dandy must have stood when he called a halt upon Pretty Pete.

It was lucky for the Jim-dandy that he had had the good sense to change his location immediately after voicing his challenge, and also lucky for him that a knoll of earth beside which the lantern stood cast half the cavern in impenetrable shadow. Otherwise he would have had forced upon him the alternative of allowing himself to be riddled with bullets, or meeting the Fire-fly at her own game.

As it was, the maddened woman, determined to have him if she lived to get her eye on him, plunged forward into the darkness as she fired, shrieking her rage at every bound.

Her figure, outlined against the dimly-illuminated wall of the cave, was clearly distinguishable to both Jim and Harry.

It was the latter who sprang toward her and tore the deadly weapon from her hand before she had accomplished her purpose.

"You wild-cat!" he cried.

She gave him still further evidence of the justice of his characterization by fiercely striking him in the face, and at the same time burying her teeth in his hand so savagely that he involuntarily let go his grip on her, retaining, however, her weapon.

Deprived of this, her only effective means of offense, she slipped under his arm, and fled shrieking toward the exit of the cave.

Meanwhile Pete had sought to retreat backward into the protecting darkness, so as to gain for himself the advantage his enemies held.

He glared grimly into the shadows which protected them, as he retreated, but the terrible suspense of awaiting the bullet that might at any moment cut short his villainous career drove another source of unexpected danger out of his thoughts.

The sound of Jim Dandy's voice had had as great an effect on Hicks, as Happy Harry's voice had had on Flash, though of another kind.

For an instant he had stood dumfounded. Then, as he saw the murderous glare in Pete's eyes, and while his ears rung with the Fire-fly's shrieks of fury, and the rapid explosions of her revolver, all of his wrongs crowded upon him, reinforced by a sense of the danger of one who was dearer to him than any one else on earth; and with a roar of deadly, vindictive hate, he made a single spring at his brutal tormentor, clutching him by the throat with his right hand, while reaching round his body for his revolver with his left.

Pete, almost thrown off his feet by the impetuosity of this unexpected onset, snarled like a wild beast, as, reaching over Hicks's arm, he drew his bowie from his boot-leg, and drove it into his back.

Then he broke away, Hicks falling upon his knees.

He had got the revolver, and now turned it to instant use, while Pete turned and fled headlong into the darkness.

Once, twice, he fired at the retreating ruffian, and then, while his ears rung with a shrill scream of distress, quite different from the vixenish cry of the Fire-fly, he sunk forward on his face.

Happy Harry leaped away in pursuit of Pete. Both went stumbling through the darkness, till Harry was brought to a standstill by a yell of such concentrated horror that his blood seemed to curdle in his veins.

He listened. Not a sound, after the yell, came from the scar-faced ruffian.

For the first time in his life Happy Harry quailed in fear. What fate had overtaken the miserable wretch there, in the darkness?

Harry turned back to where he had left his pard, to find him kneeling beside Hicks, holding him in his arms, and kissing him as no man ever kisses another.

"Don't let me die!" he heard Hicks plead.

"I've got the gold to make it up to every one! That devil could never have wrung it from me. Only keep the life in me now till I can show you where it is. Oh, will you ever forgive me—will you ever forgive me?"

"Oh, the miserable money!" cried Jim Dandy, sobbing. "Don't think of that. But how—oh, Tom! how could you break all our hearts by leaving us so? Mother has never ceased crying and praying for you. Didn't you suppose we loved you? What difference could all the money in the world make to us?"

Hicks clung with his arms about the neck of the Jim Dandy, his eyes fixed upon those that bent over him with unspeakable love and pain.

All of a sudden Happy Harry received a shock such as he had never before in all his

life sustained. He brushed his hand across his forehead, and then spoke in a voice strangely gruff, considering that his only purpose was to make his presence known.

Jim Dandy looked up, startled; then quickly bent and whispered something into Hicks's ear.

"This is my brother," was his introduction, as Harry came into the circle of light.

Hicks stared from Jim Dandy to Happy Harry, and back again, in seeming bewilderment.

Jim Dandy began to talk very rapidly, blending thanks for Harry's share in their enterprise, with inquiries for his safety, and questions as to Pete's whereabouts, with suggestions as to the care of his victim.

Harry gave the assurance that Hicks could with safety be left where he was till means could be brought to convey him to the outer world; but Jim insisted that Harry stay to guard him while Jim himself went for aid.

Left alone with his charge, Happy Harry had a great deal to say, like one who has been suddenly relieved of depression; but Hicks seemed to be greatly on his guard.

Help finally came, but unattended by Jim Dandy.

"Waal, ye see, boss," answered the fellow whom Harry questioned, "the Jim Dandy ain't in no good shape fur to come. I reckon I hain't got the thing through my top-knot yet, but the minute he shoves his nose above ground, *pop!* goes the Fire-fly, an' then she jumps on a boss what she had standin', an' off she scours as if—"

"Do you mean to say as my pard has been shot?" burst in Harry, at a white heat of excitement.

"Oh, waal, I reckon he'll come round; but he ain't in no shape—"

Harry did not stop for any more. The way he tore out of that cave would have been a wonder to any one who could have followed his course through the darkness.

He found the Jim Dandy lying on the faro table, surrounded by a gaping mob, sympathetic, but powerless to help him.

"Jim, Jim!" groaned Harry, forcing his way through the crowd, and bending over his wounded pard.

Jim opened his eyes, and putting his arm up so that it rested across Harry's shoulder, almost around his neck, he smiled brightly.

"I reckon it ain't much, pard," he said.

"How's Hicks?"

"Hicks is all right. Don't bother about him. But you! That she-devil—"

"It's all right. Don't let any one follow her. Harry, I didn't come here to fight women. Get me into my cabin, will you? And send Kitty to me."

"Kitty!" cried Harry.

"She must be in the pantry yet," added Jim, with a smile.

She was there, still bound and gagged, and proceeded to storm at Harry the moment he released her jaws.

"Hold on!" he cried. "Jim has got a hole through him, an' he's sent for you."

Instantly the girl's manner changed to lively solicitude, and she ran to Jim's side, to sob and lament distressedly.

Jim was taken to his cabin, and Kitty placed in attendance upon him.

The interview that followed was revealed to no one in Hicks's Hurrab; but, when Kitty came to the door, shortly afterward, to receive the surgeon, she had a very strange look on her pretty face.

An investigating party found that Pete had fallen into a cleft in the floor of the cavern, and left traces of blood to show the severity of his fall, but he had dragged himself away, nevertheless, and succeeded in escaping. He showed his proper estimate of the temper of the camp, when the extent of his rascality should be discovered, by not waiting to debate the appropriateness of the hangman's noose to his case.

So the bad man of the camp disappeared as silently and mysteriously as did his partner in evil—the beautiful fury, Flash the Fire-fly. Whither they fled, or whether together, no one knew.

Everybody agreed that Hicks should confiscate the abandoned possessions of the gambler; but, he showed his discretion by insisting that the proceeds of their sale should be devoted to the purchase of a fire-engine and the equipment of a company in the gayest of red shirts and white helmets.

His gold *cache* yielded him fortune enough to return to his home and make full reparation, as far as money could do it, to those whom he had victimized when mad with the agony of a speculator on the brink of ruin.

Jim recovered rapidly from his wound, though Hicks's convalescence was slower.

One day Happy Harry picked up a photograph which lay on the table along with Hicks's bowl of gruel and medicine bottles.

"Hallo!" he cried. "You never told me you had a sister. The very image of you, Jim, I swear."

"She ought to be," replied Jim, who was bent over with his back turned, vigorously blacking his boots; for he was something of a dandy in more senses than one. "Don't twins generally look alike?"

"Waal," said Harry, reflectively, "photographs don't always show up jest what they stand for."

"You'll have a chance to judge for yourself, if you ever come to Frisco," answered Jim, his voice rather jerky, possibly from the exertions he was just then making.

"Oh, will it?" cried Harry, starting up with a wonderful brightening of the countenance.

"If you take the trouble to come and see Tom—and-me."

"Oh, I'll come fast enough. I'll go right along with you when you go, if you say so."

Jim laughed.

"I don't think you'll find the sister at home," the Dandy said, apparently with some effort.

"En! Not if I go along o' you?" demanded Harry, with some astonishment and perplexity.

"She's away from home now," explained Jim. "Young ladies have to go to boarding-school, ye know. But I reckon she'll be at home during the summer vacation—some time in July or August; and again about the Christmas holidays."

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry, and dropped the subject.

He was on hand, however, to see the Fourth of July celebration, as he explained; and there he was politely received by a stately young lady, who expressed her regret that only her brother Tom was at home to welcome him to whom they were all under such heartfelt obligations.

It must be confessed that Harry was fain to rub his eyes, to assure himself that he was not dreaming. How much taller Jim's sister was than he had expected. And such beauty and princess-like airs! She fairly took his breath away, and he had never felt or appeared so awkward as during the first hour or so of his acquaintance with her.

But, Happy Harry, if the truth must be told, had a pretty good opinion of himself, and it was not long before it was apparent to any one who cared to see—and Kitty, who had come to Frisco with Jim, was of the number, you may depend!—that he was laying siege to her heart in a way calculated to take it by storm.

They were married, Jim, strange to say, not being able to return home to his sister's wedding.

After the ceremony, Harry got his bride alone in a corner, and then demanded an unconditional surrender.

"Waal, Jim," he said, "now we're pards for life, come down! What's bothered me all along is, how you painted the shaved whiskers so natural!"

At the wedding breakfast those who were not in the secret wondered why both Mrs. Harry Hammond and pretty Kitty Balch flushed so rosy red, when, with a sly glance at Miss Kitty, Happy Harry declared that his wife was a Jim-dandy.

THE END.

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